

2 M S

Special 6th Anniversary
Issue

MAGAZINE

HORROR • FANTASY • SCIENCE FICTION

\$4.95 U. S. (\$5.95 Canada)
20 Winter 1992

FICTION BY:

James S. Dorr

Casey Foster

T. A. Hennard

Bentley Little

Alix Munro

William C. Rasmussen

Joseph Sherman

James K. VanLydegraf

THE DARK CORNER

by J. N. Williamson

ADVENTURES IN THE SCREAM TRADE

by William Relling Jr.

SMALL PRESS REVIEWS

by Irwin Chapman

REVIEWS BY:

Tyson Blue

Irwin Chapman

Steven Sawicki



Executive Editor/
Publisher
Gretta M. Anderson

Contributing Editors:
Paul Dale Anderson
Irwin Chapman

U.S. Subscriptions:
4 issues \$19.00; 8 issues
\$30.00
Canada Subscriptions:
4 issues \$21.00; 8 issues
\$35.00
Foreign Subscriptions:
4 issues \$23.00; 8 issues
\$40.00

Single copies are available directly from the publisher at \$4.95 plus \$1.00 postage & handling (\$2.00 outside U.S.—U.S. funds only) or from Weinberg Books, Overlook Connection, Drumm Books, many specialty bookstores and bookstores that are serviced by Diamond Comic Distributors, 1718E Belmont Ave, Baltimore, MD 21207; Action Direct Distribution, 1401 Fairfax Trfwy., 114A Bldg., Kansas City, KS 66115 or Fine Print Distributors, 6448 Hwy. 290 East, Austin, TX 78723-1038.

If you're moving: Please let us know soon as possible. Subscriptions are sent 3rd class bulk rate, and aren't forwarded by the post office.

2AM MAGAZINE

HORROR • FANTASY • SCIENCE FICTION

Volume 5, Number 3
Fall 1992

STORIES

The Name-Quest	Joseph Sherman	9
Claw Marks	William C. Rasmussen	14
Rodeo Clown	Bentley Little	19
Ura	Alix Munro	22
Body and Soul	James K. VanLydegraf	25
Ratso	James S. Dorr	31
Dark Water	Casey Foster	34
Messages	T. A. Hennard	39

DEPARTMENTS

The Dark Corner	J. N. Williamson	5
Real Time	Letters from our readers	47
Adventures in the Scream Trade	William Relling Jr.	48
Small Press Reviews	Irwin Chapman	51

TWO SECONDS TO TWO

Masques Debuts	50
Book Reviews	55
Chapman's Picks	64
Specialty Press	65
Comics	66
Readers Poll	66

ILLUSTRATIONS

Alan Jude Summa: FRONT COVER, 8, 18, 38

2AM (ISSN 0886-8743) is published quarterly by 2AM Publications. Address all subscriptions, editorial matter, letters to the editor, and advertising inquiries to Gretta M. Anderson, 2AM Magazine, P. O. Box 6754, Rockford, IL 61125-1754. Printed in USA. Entire contents copyright © 1992 by Gretta M. Anderson. All rights reserved. Any resemblance herein to actual persons living or dead, is purely coincidental. Opinions or viewpoints in these works of fiction or criticism are not necessarily those of the publisher. All letters sent to 2AM Magazine will be treated as unconditionally assigned for publication and may be subject to editing unless specified in the letter. 2AM Magazine welcomes contributions of stories, poetry, articles, reviews and artwork, but the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. No materials will be returned without an enclosed SASE. Editorial guidelines are available on request; please send SASE. Individual copies are available at \$4.95 plus \$1.00 for postage and handling. Subscriptions are \$19.00 (Canada \$21.00; All other foreign countries \$23.00 surface rate, \$30.00 air rate) for one year (4 issues). 2AM is a trademark of 2AM Publications.



2AM

2AM

While sitting here writing this, the presidential elections are almost upon us. Since I know you won't be seeing this until after the elections, I hope you voted. And whatever the results are, I think we'll be looking at some changes and challenges ahead.

Speaking of changes and challenges, the last couple of years in particular have been rough on many of us. Until the economy picks up, I will be publishing 2AM Magazine semi-annually instead of quarterly, and will try for a third issue during each year if it's at all possible. We'll return to a quarterly schedule as soon as we can. We're still reading manuscripts, and looking for the best stories, and we may get a little backlogged from time-to-time, but I believe we've got a good thing here and we'll continue on.

And now for our contributors this issue:

James S. Dorr has had horror/dark mystery stories published in *Cemetery Dance*, *Grue*, *New Mystery*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and the Avon Books anthology *BORDERLANDS II*, and others will appear in *Pulphouse #12*, *Bizarre Bazaar* and L. Ron Hubbard's *WRITERS OF THE FUTURE* anthology. He currently shares quarters with a large, un-neutered male Himalayan cat named Mao Hsiu-shih.

Casey Foster has been working primarily on a novel for the last year and a half, but has previously been published in such magazines as *Cat Fancy*, *Horse & Rider*, *Horse Care*, and *Horsewomen*. Another story will be appearing in *Eldritch Tales*.

T. A. Hennard is a 23 year old graduate of Texas A&M University and a high school science teacher in Mineral Wells, Texas. He's been previously published in *Litmus*, an anthology published by Texas A&M University Press.

Bentley Little is a two-time recipient of SPWAO's "Best Fiction Writer" honors, and won the Bram Stoker Award for his first novel, *THE REVELATION*. His

other novels include *THE MAILMAN* and the recently released *DEATH INSTINCT*, which was published under the pseudonym, Phillip Emmons.

Alix Munro is the pseudonym of an Olde Bat who has been accused of being the Wicked Witch of the West. She lives at the limits of lunacy on the brink of bankruptcy in Topeka, Kansas with her long-suffering husband and a highly efficient automatic sofa-shredder disguised as a cat. This is her second published story; the first appeared in *After Hours*.

Lucas O'Toole is a Chicago-area freelance writer and former newspaper journalist. He has written articles for numerous trade magazines and publications. Last year, he wrote his first horror novel, *PRELUDE*, which is awaiting publication. His second horror novel, *TRIBE*, is in the works.

William C. Rasmussen hasn't had much time to write recently. He was transferred from the east coast to Memphis, TN by his employer. In spite of that, he's got tales in upcoming issues of *BEST OF THE MIDWEST*, *Eldritch Tales* and

Midnight Zoo.

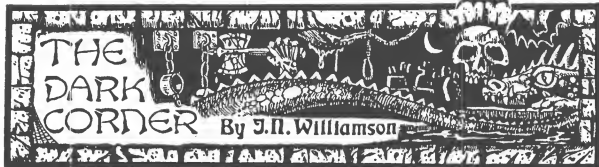
Joseph Sherman's writing credits include *THE SHINING FALCON*, *THE HORSE OF FLAME*, *CHILD OF FAERIE*, *CHILD OF EARTH*, *CASTLE OF DECEPTION* (with Mercedes Lackey) and *A STRANGE AND ANCIENT NAME*. She has also authored non-fiction books, children's books and over 80 short stories for books and magazines including *SWORD & SORCERESS IV*, *V*, *VIII* and *IX*, *VAMPIRES*, *HORSE FANTASTIC* and *DRAGON FANTASTIC*, *SISTERS IN FANTASY*, *WHATDUNNIT II*, *Cricket*, *Dragon*, *Fantasy Tales*, *THE WORLD & I*, and others. On the other side of the editorial fence, she is the Consulting Editor for Baen Books and Field Editor for Walker & Co.'s Children's Books Division.

James K. Van Lydegraf earns a living as a computer programmer. His only previously published fiction appeared in the magazine *Computeredge*. He is a past president of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, the oldest science fiction club in the world and is actively involved in running science fiction conventions.

Best,

Gretta

Gretta M. Anderson
Editor and Publisher



I don't know about you but I've grown weary of the hair-pulling efforts many horror writers have made to explain why this genre went "soft"—less desirable to publishers—a few years ago. Of course I say this in spite of the fact that I wrote more than a few thousand words exploring the subject myself. Maybe we hoped that if we put our thoughts on paper, the importunities would turn to fiction just the magical way it seemed to work with other real-life problems we wordcrafters deal with in our novels and stories.

Or maybe we thought that by talking it out, we'd find a few pockets of our horror-writing friends left unscathed by sagging publisher confidence, surviving like Daddy and Judy did in F. Paul Wilson's story, "Soft." And I'm sure there are plenty of other immunes around, hiding like us. ...We'll find each other and start everything over new." Paul added, "But until then, we can't allow the bloodsuckers to drain off whatever it is we've got that protects us."

In our (all too) real lives, there wasn't much that did protect us. But this time out of the corner *obscura* I prefer to discuss bloodsuckers of a different order: People who not only can't write yet have their names on bestselling books, but who, in some cases, don't even live lives as respectable as (say) Paul Dale Anderson, James Kisner, or J. N. Williamson.

I may have noticed the situation first over fifteen years ago when Richard Nixon's Watergate w'anglers began to do a lot of television and also write finger-pointing tomes that won them scads of money. I well recall tuning in to Dick Cavett's old PBS talk show in the hope of catching an interview with Hepburn, Groucho, even with a genuine writer. (Yes, Virginia, there were occasions when Cavett asked them to be occasional guests, even allowed them to respond to questions about writing. No wonder Dick was cancelled—and Virginia, this isn't Christmas-time so go play with your

anatomically correct dolls until Hallowe'en, and try not to get the reputation of a fresh kid who pesters grown-ups with letters about matters that don't concern you.)

Well, that was the night G. Gordon Liddy's unrepentant kisser left a stain all over our television screen while he admitted to acts theretofore considered so sinister that other men—tarr'd by the mere accusation of such deeds—would jump up in red-faced fury, fists doubled or already flying.

It was shortly after that when my brother-in-law (whom I'd never caught in the act of reading any book, I'll swear to his prior innocence on a stack of libel suits) began urging everybody to read G. Gordon's WILL. "Well," I thought, "I won't." Because the very notion of forking over a buck or so to anybody of his ilk—Liddy's, not my sister's husband's—was repulsive to me.

Since then, the fatuous or felonious or fearful, fay or flagrant or fact-twistingly fake, fever-flushed or infestatious or self-flattering flood. An undammed, undamnable but often damnable deluge of finking masquerading as literary tell-alls yet often comprising such fictions that the damned/undammed things have shoved honest works of fiction into a littered and untidy corner of a market that had already begun to dwindle and threaten to disappear: ASSASSIN, a football autobiography bylined by a bully who paralyzed another player with a cheap shot. Another autobio by the last sincere advocate of Soviet communism. Actress Shelley Winters' seemingly ceaseless book-length sleep-and-peeps infinitely detailing the adulterous activity of a generation of male movie actors. Bite-the-hand-that-fed revelations by a dozen or more children of celebrities including Joan

Crawford's daughter and Bing Crosby's eldest son. Kitty Kelly's "unauthorized," under-researched, blithely biased tomes about the ultra-famous.

Henry Hill, a mob figure, did an as-told-with called WISEGUY, at least two films were based on the low-life's monstrously self-serving and ignorant youth, and now I've seen him appear on talk shows in the role of an expert! The search for Jack the Ripper's identity continues unabated both in books and movies—though his misdeeds have been surpassed, numerically, ten times this past decade—so true crime has experienced such a glut that it's only a question of months before publishers can begin extending the regrets they've privately felt about their failure to choose and to edit toponotch horror to true crime.

But the only realm of book publishing (and general media hype) that's really galled and ongoingly infuriated me, even aroused steaming tides of envy, is quite a specific one. I refer to the fortune and fame which swiftly accrue for those already well-known men and women whose blatant mistakes, stupid sins, and arrogant evil of the sort that shouts how clearly the "writers" believed that nothing awful could happen to them are sending ruinous, and perpetuating, messages to the rest of society. Liddy, the other Water-gate conspirators, the purposefully-confounding "innocents" of Irangate and the S&L scandals, the "Wiseguy" and God knows how many others like them have become faces more familiar on book covers and TV screens than most real writers of any genre. Although he seems to be an outstanding citizen and no scoundrel, Lee Iacocca's cars seemed headed down a path illuminated only by the fading headlights of an Edsel until the taxpayers of the United States were forced to chip in and save them. Apart from the fact that I don't recall the federal government collecting any taxes in order to spare America's writers from economic

ruination, I have yet to figure out why Iacocca's autobiography even sold to a publisher—let alone became a soaring best seller!

Every reader of this column could name someone who has utterly failed, done terrible things that couldn't be discussed openly in what passes for polite society, or violated the rules of common sense or the laws of the land and then become richer and better-liked as a clear reward. Actor Stacy Keach gets arrested in England for drug possession, effectively puts everybody working on his TV program out of work, then winds up making speeches about it, resumes his acting career, and becomes the host of tony TV shows and an honored guest on award programs. Earvin Johnson's promiscuous conduct has obliged the team he says he loved to pursue free agents to fill the hole he left, probably cost the Lakers a conference championship, threatened to cast a pall over the internationally longed-for Olympics—will die for his arrogance—and a publisher couldn't wait to sign Magic to a multi-book contract! (Coincidentally, the most concealed player in the history of the N.B.A., Wilt Chamberlain, published his latest egotistical volume of memories at roughly the moment Johnson's disclosure was made. I caught Wilt on Larry King's TV program, trying futilely to make potential readers of his book understand that there's more in it than his declaration of having bedded 20,000 women. I'm reading the book, and Chamberlain's right: He found dozens of other ways to assure us that he is unique, special, one of the greatest men of the century. But what I'll remember about the man is the embarrassment in his face while King was politely but stubbornly refusing to let him off the hook about the statement Wilt had made in "his own" words. For a period of something between 24 and 48 hours, sin was unpopular in America.)

There's nothing necessarily wrong with ghost-writing books; I've done three, one of which sold extremely well in the war memoir/military adventure genre. But I wonder how some of the ghosts sleep at night, if they don't move restlessly through their rafters, haunted themselves by matters that properly should be troubling the consciences of those who lived the lives the writers so faithfully recorded.

In November 1991, a *New York Times* critic, Michiko Kakutani, reviewed

Walter Kendrick's nonfictional *THE THRILL OF FEAR* (subtitled "250 Years of Scary Entertainment"). Citing Virginia Woolf's allusion to a "strange human craving for the pleasure of feeling afraid," Kakutani quoted Kendrick's argument that horror's "wellspring" is "the fear of death—or rather the fear of being dead, of the body's losing form, turning slimy, melting away." The critic said Kendrick used Philippe Ariès' *THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH* as a springboard toward concluding that artistic "images of rot" transformed dead things "into self-conscious products of the imagination" which, Kakutani went on, enabled horror writers "to turn the idea of dying into something predictable," even safe.

With the same reasoning, then, a period when readers—publishers, anyway—don't want to devour "scary entertainment" logically suggests writers aren't successfully accomplishing that transformation or, perhaps, aren't adequately inventing "products of the imagination" *per se*. If so, that may well mean that the perceived trend away from the supernatural and toward more realistic horror based on "true life" slayings is responsible for the fiction's slippage.

Why? The author Kendrick observed that, in the 1700s, the very "reality of corpses... came to seem disgusting, obscene, dangerous" to the public health and were therefore moved to cities' peripheries, "safely ensconced underground" to become part of the trees and grass. So it was that in our 1980s focussing either solidly or exclusively on "death and deadness" in horror fiction initiated no transformation and may instead have stressed "images of rot."

Putting it a different way, instead of pointing a finger toward an evil source which unconscious minds felt they might resist with faith, talisman of faith, strength of character or just the conjuring in imagination of "something predictable and safe," some writers—sometimes—have indicated the rotting body, the stink, the disgusting or even obscene sight. Some of us have hauled back to "the centers of cities," as Kendrick described it, this "spectacle of rot."

Perhaps most of our editors or even our readers preferred them on the peripheries.

Yet even in the vaunted *Times* were three examples of horror's endurance and viability, all on the same page. One was Mr. Kendrick's book, as an accomplished fact; two was the Kakutani review,

and three was the headline of a "TV Weekend" piece: "Murder, Rape, Mayhem: It Must Be Sweeps."

Mayhem and murder belong as much to horror as they do to mystery or "real-life" writing, and so far as I'm concerned, true-crime is welcome to rape.

At this writing—quite late in 1991—Pulphouse's trade paperback edition of a book I've edited (*MASQUES IV*) is expected in print any time, and it probably will be available from Box 1227, Eugene, Oregon 97440 well before you read these words, I mention it here to celebrate the surprising fact that the MacLay hardback (\$19.95; \$49 for the signed limited from MacLay & Associates, Box 16253, Baltimore, MD 21210) has thus far sold as many copies in seven weeks as *MASQUES II* sold in seven months. By the time you read this, only the *Pulphouse* pb may be left—

And this during a dreadful recession, at a time when most people think horror fiction is so soft that, lifting some of it, it would drip through your fingers!

How to explain it—or, if I were superstitious, how to settle for gratitude instead of examining the situation and risking a bruise or two? In the reviews published by *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Library Journal* and *Reading For Pleasure*—periodicals no one tells you are very important until you're nearer a publisher or two—a total of twenty-one writers have been singled out for comment. Not one or two "name" wordworkers, in short—21 of the 26 writers in *MASQUES IV*!

The fact stands as a prospectively eye-opening notice to publishers that the hardcore nucleus of the horror-reading marketplace that will always exist would rather your editors pursued excellence and originality instead of anteing up an irresistible thousand bucks or two for the brand-name guys (who probably won't find the offer irresistible, at all).

Reading for Pleasure, itemicising the kinds of yarns in the book by type (frightening was just one of the terms selected), mentioned "disturbing" and "thought-provoking." And *PW* made your editor and columnist's day by saying the tales were "polished" and that they "give pause for reflection."

That "transformation" Walter Kendrick referred to is possible and the *MASQUES* series proves it.

I think Virginia Woolf would have approved.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦



The Name-Quest

by Josepha Sherman
Copyright © 1992 Josepha Sherman

It had been a long weary walk through this rough hill country, picking her careful way down and down between boulders twice as tall as a man, and Derwen was glad enough to be coming to the end of it. Granted, she never regretted her decision not to be a tame house bard, bound to one *dun*, one fortress, singing only praises of her patron's clan; the young woman enjoyed seeing ever new places, learning ever new songs. But after days spent up here in the company of rocks and wild birds, it would be pleasant to be among her own human kind again.

The bard paused for a moment, shifting her harp to a more comfortable position on her shoulder, brushing back wildly wind-blown black hair, looking with her clear blue eyes down this last slope to where a dark green forest of pine began. At the edge of the forest, sheltered between trees and rocks, huddled a croft, a small farm, its one house of ancient stone and a thatched roof all but black with age. Derwen licked dry lips and thought of water, and started down.

There was a well, and a woman watching her warily, one hand at the knife at her waist. But Derwen's mind was more on water than weapons.

"Good day, lady," she said politely. "Might I drink from your well?"

She took the woman's shrug for agreement. The water was mossy and cool, and Derwen drank blissfully, casually watching the woman over the rim of the bucket, seeing a work-worn face, thick brown hair coiled up out of the way, a sturdy body half hidden by a long brown woollen tunic. The farm-wife stared right back at her with such hard, unblinking eyes that Derwen gave a soft laugh and let the bucket slide back into the well.

"I'm no robber, woman, I'm only..." But there was something behind the hard stare, and Derwen let her original words trail off, murmuring instead, "But there's trouble heavy on you, poor one."

The woman made a quick, startled sign against evil. "How could you know—"

"Oh, come now! I could hardly be one of the Other Folk, now, could I? What, with iron on me and the bright sunlight pouring down? Woman, I'm nothing more alarming than a bard, Derwen by name, and you surely must know that bards are trained to see truly." That Derwen was gifted with a clearer sight than most, she chose not to say. "Is there anything I can do? The matter's not simple illness, is it?"

"No. Nothing so easily cured." The farm-wife turned away, glancing back over her shoulder. "Come inside, and I'll see if I can find you something to eat."

Derwen followed her, a few clucking hens scuttling out of her way. A small herd of goats watched her with the mocking yellow eyes of their kind, and Derwen wondered aloud why they weren't at pasture.

"Daren't lose them," the woman answered shortly. "Come."

The farm house was dark and warm and quite tidy, from the neat loom in one corner to the bright orange cheeses hanging from the crossbeams. Near the loom was a small cradle, and a happy little blond babe within, crowing with laughter as the woman bent over him. Derwen, moved to see the harsh face softened, transformed almost to beauty, was shocked to realize the farm-wife's youth, scarcely more than her own.

And yet... the source of the trouble was here, she was sure of it, the feel of it like the faintest touch of mist.... Oh, strange, strange, indeed.

Because she was puzzled, the bard reached for her harp, as another might reach for the comforting touch of a familiar amulet. A beautiful thing, that harp: sweetly curved, strung in the ancient fashion, the lower octaves in bronze, the uppers in silver. As the strings sang forth the first gleaming of sound, the farm woman turned, transfixed, and even the baby stopped his chucklings. Suddenly aware of her audience, Derwen smiled to herself. Seating herself on a rickety stool, she let her harp sing of quietness, and peace, and the dawning of hope.

The music faded. There was a long silence. Then the farm-wife let out her breath in a long sigh. "You really are a bard, aren't you? Didn't know there were any women bards."

"There aren't many."

The woman glanced at Derwen in sudden shyness. "Maybe... I've heard tales of bards.... Maybe you can help me?"

"I won't know that till you let me know the name of your trouble. Or, for that matter, what I'm to call you."

"Ach, yes. Morag. Morag, daughter of old Donal, and him gone these ten years."

"And the trouble?" the bard prodded gently.

Morag shuddered. "My husband, as you might have guessed from seeing no sign of a man about, is dead." She paused, eyes shadowed with memory. "He was a kind enough man, a good farmer, too. A good woodsman, too, when we needed the wood. But... one day he took it into his head to search out gold in those barren mountains. And the mountains killed him." She made a sharp little gesture of negation with one hand. "That was nigh to a year ago."

Derwen glanced involuntarily at the baby. Morag flushed and said sharply, "Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking, that the babe's not nearly old enough."

"I wasn't accusing you."

"It... ach, well, it isn't my child at all. One night I found a girl, mere skinny bit of a thing, at my door, alone and frightened and very much with child. Poor thing, some lordling or other had—well, you know. Being a servant, she hadn't had much say in the matter. When the lordling's wife found out, she'd blamed the girl, of course, and thrown the poor thing out to starve." Morag sighed. "I don't know how she made it so far,

frail and weak as she was. I took her in, and the babe was born soon after. But, as I'd feared, the poor mother died."

"Then you don't know the child's true ancestry."

"And I don't care!" Morag's eyes flashed. "I can not have a child of my own. But little Donal is mine now, and I love him, as truly as though I'd borne him myself."

"Yes," Derwen said gently, "I know. But you still haven't told me your trouble."

Morag winced. "It was at twilight, two days ago," she began reluctantly, "when the goats fell sick, all of them at once, even that tough old he-goat. I need those goats! I need them for milk and meat, for little Donal and me, for trading with the village south of here."

"Go on. Please."

"As I stood staring at the sickly lot of them, I heard the sound of hoofs, and found a chariot coming towards me, pulled by two fine ponies. In the chariot was a woman mantled in a green cloak, her hair red as flame, standing tall and proud and handsome beside her charioteer like a queen or some high noble woman." Morag shook her head. "Well, I couldn't be rude to one like her, now, could I? 'Welcome to my farm, lady,' I told her, 'such as it is.'"

"Your goats are sickly," she said, and her voice made me think of one of those wild mountain eagles. "But it is within my mind to cure them. Of course," she added with a cool look at me, like I wasn't worth more than one of those goats, "there must be a price."

"Well, I stared right back at her. 'I'm poor, lady,' I told her. 'What do I have you could possibly want?'"

"She seemed to think that over, then gave me a thin sort of smile. 'What, indeed. Let me cure them, then, and ask a reward afterwards.'"

"Ah, no!" Derwen cried in sudden sharp alarm. "And did you agree?"

Morag glared. "What else could I do? I agreed, and she passed among them, holding her rich mantle aside daintily. What she did then, what she said, I can't tell you, but soon she was back at her chariot's side—and my goats were up again, and

frisking about like spring-mad kids. I would have thanked her then, with tears in my voice, but she cut me short with a cold wave of her hand.

"You granted me the right to name my own reward," she said. "I shall take only one small thing. Your son."

Morag stopped, choking, and Derwen said gently, "Yet she didn't take

him."

"Oh, no. Not yet." Morag swallowed convulsively, then continued, "I begged her not to take my little one. But no, she would not be moved, she would have my Donal, come what may. Still... maybe I did touch her cold heart at least a little, because she told me:

"I shall grant you this boon: three nights' grace. And if by the third night, you can call me by my rightful name, I shall not take the child."

"Her rightful name! Gods! It's all a storyteller's game with her, but I—The second night is almost here, and I have no more idea of her name than of—of what lies beyond the sky!"

Derwen hesitated a moment, then said thoughtfully, "Don't despair, not yet. We still have two chances."

Morag looked sharply up. "We? You will help me, then?"

The sudden sickness and just as sudden recovery of the goats sounded suspiciously like the effects of a spell. But in whose hands? Who was this mysterious noblewoman? No one skilled in magic would waste time in baby-stealing. But an amateur might... A woman dabbling in Power might want the shedding of innocent blood....

Derwen's hands tightened angrily on her harp. She was, being a bard, only one degree of training from the *druidhe*; she could hardly turn aside from the misuse of Power.

"I will try to help you," she told Morag. "I give you my word as a bard."

With the twilight came hoofbeats. Heart racing, Derwen moved with Morag to the farmhouse's doorway to watch the approaching chariot.

And Derwen frowned, confused. For a moment she saw what surely Morag saw: a chariot pulled by a fine team of ponies, and in it, a tall, imperious woman mantled in rich green and veiled in flaming red hair.

But the bard's clear sight could seldom be tricked by illusion. The chariot seemed to blur as she stared at it, to be replaced by something of wonder, a chariot of silver spun fine and intricate as a spider's web, pulled by two slim, elegant, arch-necked steeds with eyes blue as the twilight and with coats white as snow under moonlight.

And the woman—Derwen's heart gave a great leap of shock. Gods, how wrong she'd been! Here was no bored noblewoman toying with cruelty and magic. Ah, no, this was never a human woman she faced, not this slim, fine-boned being whose face was a marvel of sharp elegance, whose eyes were a blaze of green, whose hair was a fine, wild golden mist.

Oh, Gods, what have I gotten myself into?

The glowing green eyes met Derwen's stunned gaze. "You see me truly, mortal."

Derwen glanced at Morag, who stood stiff and unseeing, and realized with a shiver that the nonhuman woman had removed herself and the bard from the normal passage of time. "Yes," she answered, knowing better than to lie. "You are no human, but a woman out of Faerie."

"You should not be able to see so clearly."

There was no clear threat in the plain words, but Derwen

SPECIAL AUTHOR ADS

Authors: If you'd like to advertise your own books in the pages of 2AM, we'll typeset an ad to your specifications and provide space at substantial savings. Please write for details.

Gretta M. Anderson
2AM Magazine Author Ads
Box 6754
Rockford, IL 61125-1754

saw the tensing of sleek muscles and hastily raised her arms in desperate self-defense. And so the little silver whip-lash that was meant to blind the bard at its touch struck instead against the bronze and silver strings of the harp she held. There was a bright chime of sound, and the faerie woman drew back with a faint hiss of surprise.

"So-o! Where did you get that harp?"

"It was a death-gift from another bard. As it was to him. Why?"

There had been a hint of a tale about it, that its wood had come from alien trees, indeed.... Derwen waited eagerly for the faerie woman's answer. But all the other said was a flat, "You bear it well. Go your way. I will not harm you."

Oh, she wanted very much to go her way, to leave perilous faerie matters alone! "Ah... no," the bard said with genuine reluctance. "I'm sorry, but I can't leave just yet. You see, I gave my word to help this woman. I cannot break it."

"Fool, to concern yourself with that, when you bear such a harp."

Derwen sighed. "A vow is a vow."

Was that a flicker of respect in the green eyes? "So be it." With a thin, cold smile, the faerie woman restored them to the normal course of time, and listened with quiet mockery as poor Morag tried in vain to name her. When the woman was gone away again, Morag turned on Derwen in angry despair.

"You said you would help me. But you just stood there and did nothing!"

But Derwen was looking down the hill to where the faerie woman had vanished into the forest. Faerie... Dealing with a human toying with magic was one thing, but risking the enmity of the Folk was something very much else again. For a moment, seized by the pure panic of self-survival, the bard asked herself sharply, *Why, oh, why did I give my word?*

But give it she had. Of honor, she couldn't run away now.

Derwen turned to face Morag, and her steady gaze held the woman in silence. "I am about to help you, if I can. But you must know this: Your foe is of Faerie."

"Of... Faerie...." Morag breathed in dawning horror.

"But—Why? Why me?"

"You've never done anything to offend one of Them? Never?"

"No! I swear it!"

The shock in Morag's eyes was too sharp not to be real. Derwen nodded in resignation. "So be it."

"Where are you going?"

"To follow, before it grows too dark to track her."

"Follow one of Them?" Morag gasped.

But Derwen had already started off after the woman of Faerie.

For one as clear-sighted as the bard, the faerie chariot had left a track of sorts: a slight glimmering of soft silver. Fighting fear, Derwen followed the gleaming track down into the silent world of the pine forest.

Silent, indeed. Few birds chose to perch in pines, and the forest floor was carpeted with fallen needles that deadened footsteps. In the uncertain twilight light, it was almost like

walking in a dream. But there was an ever-increasing chill in the sharp, clean-smelling air that made Derwen snatch her cloak about herself and hurry on.

Gradually, as she continued to descend, she left the pines behind, gradually entered a more tangled wood of lusher growth. Trees grew close together here, shutting out most of what remained of the light, and Derwen found herself stumbling even as she struggled to move silently.

Only a faerie vehicle could have travelled through here.

Faerie. The thought brought a new chill to her. Derwen shuddered convulsively, and forced herself forward. *You gave your word. Whatever the danger, you did give your word.*

But all at once the bard stopped short. Voices! She threw herself down before she could be spotted, biting back a curse as she landed on sharp roots. Warily, hidden amid the underbrush, Derwen parted branches to watch.

Three of the Folk were in the little glen, clearly painted by the rays of the rising moon, women green-clad and radiant of hair, with a sharp, fierce-edged beauty to them that made Derwen draw a quick breath of wonder.

One of the three was the woman she sought.

It was amusing the immortal ones to play with a mortal language, though they spoke it with distaste, aristocrats deigning to toy with peasant ways. *Never mind*, Derwen told them silently. *At least this way I can understand you.* It seemed clear that the other two faerie Folk were somewhat peeved with their sister, chiding her for her insistence on remaining in this dull mortal place, for concerning herself with dull mortal lives.

The woman turned on them with green eyes ablaze. "You know why I stay: for revenge! It was not your servant slain by the human male's clumsy tree-felling. He swore it was an accident. An accident! The fool. But there must be a life for a life."

"And you saw him die from gold-sickness," cut in the second woman.

Ah, Derwen thought in sudden comprehension, *Morag's husband.*

"A life for a life," murmured the third woman. "The balance is settled. Why not leave?"

"Because the balance is *not* settled." The faerie glared at her sisters. "A mortal dared kill one of Faerie. A mortal! Are you saying his petty, empty little life is equal to one of our own?"

"It was only a servant."

"My servant!"

The second woman made a wordless little sound of impatience. "This is no thirst for justice, I think, only a satisfying of pride—"

"No!"

"Yes," said the third. "Oh, come, sister-kin, you had no particular fondness for the servant."

"It was an accident," the second woman murmured. "The man is dead."

The faerie woman glared from one to the other. "Do you forget honor? The balance cannot be settled, not while heir to the slayer's blood still lives." She struck a defiant pose. "And

in one short mortal night the law shall be fulfilled and I shall have my revenge. Then the babe shall be mine, for neither that mortal woman its mother, nay, nor that clear-sighted bard who sought to interfere, shall ever guess my name!"

"Ae, Tiri, don't—"

"Hush!"

"Tiri, what—"

"Be silent! You don't know who might be listening."

The other women burst into laughter. "Who? The human folk? The silly little mortals? Oh, no, they're too terrified of their own mortal night to venture out into it!" Teasingly, they danced out of her reach, chanting, "There's no one to hear your name, Tiri, oh Tiri, no one to hear your name, our Tirna, Timatheriel."

Derwen, lying hidden in the underbrush, forgot the sharp roots digging in to her flesh. *Timatheriel*. She clenched her teeth with all her might to keep from crying out in disbelief triumph, but her blue eyes laughed with sudden joy.

Morag stared at the returning bard. "Thought you weren't coming back."

Derwen stifled a yawn. "I thought I wasn't, either. They stayed in that glen all night, talking and arguing and jesting till the first morning rays. And I didn't dare move till I knew for certain they were gone."

"They? They who? The—the Folk?"

Derwen nodded. "And yes, I have some lovely news for you."

"You have her name?"

"I do. And I'll share it with you gladly. But first there's something to be done."

"What's that?"

The bard gave Morag a weary smile. "Sleep," she said.

With the twilight, the faerie woman came again. To Derwen's rested, true-seeing eyes, that one was a wonder, indeed, all richly clad in silvery-green, like the shimmering of leaves in moonlight. But the lovely thing's bearing was proud, her green eyes hard and bright.

Expecting triumph, the bard thought. *But this time, the triumph won't be hers.*

She stepped aside, allowing Morag her moment. And the farm-wife played it well.

"Lady, will you not leave us in peace?"

"It is the third night."

"Won't you extend the time of grace?"

"The pact was made. Name me, or give over the child."

"Ahh, you are cruel! Is your name *Deirdre*?"

"The Troubler' I may be, but that is never my name."

"Is it *Fedelma*?"

"Never that! I give you one more guess. Then the child is mine."

"Ah, no! Take me instead!"

"You." The green eyes flashed scorn. "What should I do with such a poor thing as you?"

"Poor I may be," Morag retorted, "aye, and maybe foolish, too—but not so foolish I can't shout the name of the faerie

woman *Timatheriel*!"

The faerie woman stared, stunned. Then she gave one wild cry of rage, and whirled on the watching bard.

"You! This is your doing! Did you spy on me last night? Is that what you did?" The sheer inhuman fury in her eyes held Derwen silent. "You have won," the faerie woman continued flatly. "The woman keeps her child and shall not be bothered further. You have won—and I wish you no joy of it."

Those alien, hating eyes burned into Derwen's own for an endless moment. Then *Timatheriel* was gone.

Joy was in every bit of Morag's being, and she hurried to hug and love her little Donal till he crowed his delight at her.

But Derwen stood alone, chilled by the memory of hatred in *Timatheriel*'s eyes. Were this a song, she thought wryly, this would surely be the last stanza, with all the ends tucked up into one neat happy ending. But real life was seldom so... reassuring. Or so simple.

Leave, she told herself, go down from the hills among the farms and fortresses. The Folk will never deign to follow you.

And yet, and yet... Dear gods, surely this was no longer her affair, there was no reason to put herself in new peril.

Except one: She was a bard. And this song she had begun was still unfinished, the ending all wrong, the—ach, yes, just as *Timatheriel* had said, the balance was unrestored.

Fool, Derwen told herself sharply.

Was she? Perhaps she had been too self-confident all along, too secure in the knowledge of her safety: by law, any man or woman who harmed a bard died. Any human man or woman.

Derwen shuddered. If she turned aside now, if she meekly fled from this nonhuman testing.... No one would know.

She would know. The bard would forever be looking over her shoulder, flinching from every shadow, guarding her tongue lest she sing one perilous word, her fingers lest they chance to play some faerie chord—gods, no! If *that* was how her life would be, she'd might as well retire to some cozy *dun*, some fortress where she could be a safe, tame, domestic creature.

Derwen's lip curled in distaste. Decided at last, she shouldered her harp and slipped away, following the faerie woman's trail once more, praying *Timatheriel* and her sisters would remain in mortal lands just this little bit longer. Down through the forest the bard went, hands moist and mouth dry, but unable to turn back now.

But it wasn't just the three faerie women in that glen. This night there was a small throng of men and women both in the moonlight, presumably brought by *Timatheriel*'s sisters' hints, and the clear, wild, alien voices and sharp-edged beauty of them stopped the breath in Derwen's throat.

I could go back. I could hide here, and them none the wiser. I could—

No. Of honor, no. Heart pounding painfully, the bard gathered her harp and her courage to herself, and stepped out of hiding. In an instant, she was surrounded. She could tell no expression from the fierce, ageless faces or the glowing, opaque eyes, but the very stance of the Folk spoke of disbelief.

Timatheriel moved forward, voice taut with anger. "Do you *dare* to come here, fool?"

"I should think that obvious," purred a tall, elegant faerie man, his slanted green eyes cool with amusement. "Wiser to ask her why she has come."

There was the faintest edge of condescension in his voice, as though Tirnatheriel was his inferior. *Or... a child*, the bard realized suddenly. *Ah, and is that it?* Faerie age, or the lack of it, was impossible for a human to read, but: *Is all this the result not of insulted adult pride, but of youthful uncertainty?*

Wondering, Derwen said, "I must speak with this lady," straining her bardic training to keep her voice calm and courteous and level.

"Well?" Tirnatheriel glared at her. "Speak swiftly. While yet you can."

Such melodrama. *I was right*, Derwen thought. The agelessness of faerie aspects was deceptive; despite her outer appearance, Tirnatheriel was still a girl within, an insecure girl amid adults, trying desperately to be one of them.

Which didn't mean she wasn't dangerous. Derwen said carefully, "There is something you must know of the human woman and her baby—Wait, hear me out!" She held her breath, heart pounding anew, till the sudden fire had burned away to embers in the fierce green eyes.

"Speak on, mortal. I will not strike till you have finished."

"You were right, I did spy on you last night. And since you spoke in a human tongue, I understood you."

"Ahh..." It was a whisper of sound from one of Tirnatheriel's sisters.

Tirnatheriel ignored it. "You heard all? You know why the mortal man died?"

"Yes."

"What's this? No cries of outrage?"

"I'm not a fool." Derwen said flatly. "I know the laws of your kind are different from mine."

"How clever," someone murmured in delicate malice, but Derwen waved that away. "I heard you say as well," she continued, "that the balance would not be restored while heir to his blood yet lived."

"You've destroyed that with your interference!"

"No." Derwen took a deep breath. "You see, the baby is not of his blood." Quickly, before the sudden, startled silence could be broken by the other, she told the rest of it: the young woman rescued by Morag's kindness, the child born and the mother dead, the raising by Morag of the babe till she had all but forgotten it was not blood of her blood, flesh of her flesh.

"You could not have known," the bard said quietly. "Mortal time means nothing to you; you could not have known it couldn't have been his child. And so your balance is restored, and you need feel no shame."

"The truth—you humans tell falsehoods as easily as you breathe! Is this the truth?"

Derwen refused to take offense. "It is."

Her gaze was clear and steady and unafraid. And it was the faerie gaze that faltered first.

"But... why did you come here?" Tirnatheriel's voice quivered slightly. "There was no need; you were safe from me."

"Honor," the bard said simply. "It wasn't fair to leave you in ignorance. I have my own need for balance." She paused.

"And... I have never had an enemy, not of my kind, not of any other. I would not have one now."

There was a long silence. Then Tirnatheriel's head drooped. "Nor have you one," she murmured.

There was a cool ripple of laughter from the elegant faerie man who'd first challenged Tirnatheriel. "You confuse us, human," he told the bard, his voice all at once so warm and charming that a little shiver raced up Derwen's spine. "And that is something few mortals can do. You have amused us this night, and that is a rare treat for us." Something cool and calculating glinted in the slanted eyes. "We cherish the clever ones, as we cherish the song-makers.... Come, what will you have of us in exchange?"

Derwen bent to retrieve her harp, straightening as slowly as she could, stalling for time, thinking desperately. She had survived so far. If she made a mistake now.... But Faerie gifts were perilous, Faerie whims were swift-changing and uncertain. "I didn't come here for reward," she said carefully. "I ask only one thing: to stay, unharmed, unchanged by aught but mortal life, within this mortal time and realm—"

She saw by the faerie man's almost imperceptible start that he had, indeed, been toying with the idea of snatching her away to Faerie. Swallowing dryly, Derwen finished:

"—and treasure for the rest of my natural mortal days the memory of faerie friendship."

There was a burst of laughter from the Folk. "Oh, well and carefully spoken!" the faerie man said. "You ask for no small thing, clever one." His teeth flashed—white, sharp—in a quick, fierce smile. "But—so be it!"

With a whirl of wind, the Folk were gone, leaving the glen empty and somehow forlorn with their passing. Derwen, stunned, let out her breath in a long, shaken sigh, looking about at the forest darkness, wondering if she'd made the right choice. What if she had let them take her with them to Faerie? The thought of never growing old, never dying, of hearing and learning music more wondrous than anything from a mortal mind—

Of living as a pet, forever fearful of her masters' whims. Gods, no! Better, far better, this way.

"So be it," Derwen echoed belatedly, and set out back to Morag and the human world.

Claw Marks

by William C. Rasmussen
Copyright © 1992 William C. Rasmussen

Something had been at the garbage again, Russ saw, as he stood in the open doorway in the early morning chill, looking at the rubbish and food scraps scattered about his backyard as if a ticker tape parade had passed by. "Damn!" he muttered under his breath, before stepping outside onto the patio, pulling his jacket up tighter around his neck against the cold bite of the stiff March wind, and stopping to inspect the shredded remains of the four or five-odd plastic garbage bags, whose contents now lay strewn across the cement floor and lawn, roughly tracing the night vandal's path of destruction. *Fuckin' animals!* he said to himself.

He strode over to the edge of the patio and glanced about—at his littered grass; at the neighbors' houses and yards framing his own; and at the ever-encroaching woods beyond, which, at times, seemed to be moving visibly closer and closer to his property, crowding him, strangely... *No*, he thought. *Whatever animal did it is long gone by now. Wonder what it was, though... Dog? Cat? Raccoon? Skit! It's not the first time; it won't be the last. It'll be back.*

Scowling, breath chuffing in and out of his mouth like a steam engine, he turned around, intending to retreat into the house to throw on a warmer jacket and hunt up some more trash bags so he could clean up the mess.

And that was when he noticed the claw marks.

Curiously, his house had been built some twenty or twenty-five years ago with an exterior laundry room, one that was, for the most part, exposed to the elements. Little more than a five-by-nine foot enclosure, it barely provided enough room to contain a washer, dryer, and a few overhead storage cabinets; and its single-wall construction also necessitated the use of a small electric heater during the winter months to prevent the pipes from freezing. This tiny room was tucked under the patio and attached to the kitchen, but access to it could only be gained by exiting the back door of the house, veering right and entering through another door, which was fastened on the outside by means of a clothespin clipped through a latch to allow for quick and easy entrance. It was around this clothespin, about three or four feet off the cement floor, that Russ found the claw marks.

He stepped cautiously over to the laundry room, never once taking his eyes off the long slashes carved like fingerprints into the pale grey door. Crouching down for a closer look, he ran his hand lightly over the ragged grooves, feeling their depth, and was rewarded with a splinter for his efforts. He winced, his concentration broken for the moment, but, shortly, he managed to force his attention back to the door.

There appeared to be several sets of claw marks, he realized, as if the creature responsible for them had literally attacked the door, trying earnestly to get in—to get out of the cold, most likely—but had failed, the undisturbed clothespin

lock offering irrefutable evidence of that fact. Each set of scratches bore four distinct furrows which, by his own rough estimate, measured approximately three or four inches across in total width, indicating to him that the animal had been extremely large—but then he wasn't all that familiar with the average paw size of an opossum or raccoon, or any other forest animal that might have left it. But quite naturally, he was concerned for his family, concerned that a wild animal would venture this close to the ones he loved, possibly endangering them. Apparently, the nocturnal intruder's survival instinct closely mirrored that of a human's—and that was what frightened him the most. *What if the animal returned when he wasn't around to protect Jenny and Matt? What then?* he thought.

Shaking his head in frustration, he rose and fumbled with the clothespin catch, hesitating only momentarily before swinging the laundry room door open, inspecting its congested interior, and flicking the electric heater off. He shut the door and secured it again, glancing briefly at the marks on the front, so noticeable to him now; he made a mental note to sand the wood immediately and spare Jenny any unnecessary worry. Continuing on into the kitchen, he returned shortly to pick up the mess in the patio and backyard.

Later, during breakfast, he told his wife and four-year-old son that some animal had gotten into the garbage (leaving out the part about the scratches on the door), and advised them to be extra careful for the time being when going outside.

Sometime late in the afternoon, as Russ was making his way down the hall to wake Matt up from his nap, Jenny pulled him aside.

"Did you see those scratches on the laundry room door?" she asked, her voice tinged with fear.

"Yeah," he replied resignedly, his shoulders slumping over the realization that she had found the claw marks before he'd had a chance to do anything about them.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she began, panic tugging at her features. "Aren't you upset? What kind of animal do you think made them? Maybe we should—"

"Jen, relax," he said, interrupting her manic rambling and trying not to raise his voice too loud in case his son was listening. "Everything's going to be all right. I've thought a lot about it... and I'm convinced it was only a raccoon or some other animal from the woods trying to get in out of the cold. It wasn't able to, so it probably won't be back," he lied. "That's why I didn't mention it to you; I didn't want to worry you needlessly, okay?"

"I don't know..." she said, her voice trailing away in indecision. "Are you sure? I mean—it's just that—oh, I don't know," she cried, on the verge of tears. "I just don't want anything to happen to Matt... or to you... to us, d'you understand?"

"Yes, I do," he said as she came to him, melting into his arms. "Trust me. There's nothing to worry about, all right?"

"I guess so," she replied, sniffing, and whipping her tears on his shoulder. "I just hope you're right."

"I am, hon, so forget about it."

They disentangled and, together, went in to wake their son.

Just before turning in for the night, Russ ducked out the back door—breath pluming in front of his face in feathery wisps; the patio light spilling partway onto their lawn—and turned the heater on in the laundry room, securing the door after him. And for just a moment, he plumbed the stygian depths of his backyard, unsure of what lay hidden within its shadowy recesses. He realized he was shaking—whether from the cold, or just plain fright, he wasn't certain—but, pushing his anxieties aside, he turned around quickly and reentered the house.

He did not sleep well that night.

He woke early the next morning, slipped quietly out of bed so as not to disturb his wife, and hastily threw on some warm clothes. Tiptoeing down the hall as if he were an intruder in his own house, he peeked in on Matt—relieved to see that he was still asleep—then continued on into the kitchen. He zipped his jacket up and peered tentatively through the glass-paned back door. Frost blanketed the ground like a woolen comforter; an icy lump of unease slid down his throat. But, the rebagged garbage appeared to have made it through the night safely, he observed. Bolstered by this positive note, he turned the handle and stepped outside.

At first glance everything seemed to be in order, he thought, that is, until he looked at the laundry room door, and discovered the new claw marks.

A spider-like chill crawled up his spine, raising goose bumps on the back of his neck and along both of his arms. *Son of a bitch!* he thought. *The damn thing came back! It came back!*

Steeling himself against his misgivings, he knelt down to examine the fresh scars, running his hand once again across their surface, almost certain there had not been this many yesterday.

It's almost as if it were giving me a warning, he considered. *Damn! What does it want? What?*

Twisting his body in the direction of the woods, he stared at the tops of the distant trees, angry, and convinced that during the night, if it were possible, they had crept even closer to his house, and would soon be breathing down his very neck. And though he had always lived within close proximity to forests and tree-congested parks, at this exact moment he feared the simple fact of their existence, feeling almost as if an alien presence now stood in their midst, dwelt among their numbers; it unnerved him. But he was not going to just sit around idly and let anyone or anything dictate the way he and his family were going to live their lives. *No way!* he thought.

Standing up, he unlocked the laundry room door and turned off the heater. Then he walked purposefully back into the house, a plan blossoming in his mind even as he pulled down the attic access panel in the hallway and hauled out the collapsible ladder. He clambered up the steps as quietly as possible, tugged

on the light switch cord, and began poking around amongst the jumble of dusty boxes and packing crates, the general clutter of clothes and odds and ends one accumulates through the years as easily as one develops wrinkles. And just when the chill was beginning to get to him, he found what he was looking for.

From beneath a tangle of old, rusty curtain rods, the single-shot .22 caliber rifle came away easily in his hands; given to him as a young boy, its insignificant weight made it seem more like a child's toy than the deadly weapon it was. He only hoped he'd never have to use it.

He checked the action to make sure it wasn't loaded, then sighted down the barrel (the stock kissing his cheek lightly), and wiped away a thin layer of dust with the fingers of his left hand. He wondered if the rifle were still functional.

"Russ...where are you?" the sleepy voice said.

Damn, he thought. "Up here. In the attic."

"What are you doing up there at *this* hour of the morning?"

"Uhh," he stammered, edging over to the attic opening and smiling down at his wife. "Looking for some sandpaper...and the sanding block," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Can't it wait till after breakfast?"

"Just found it," he said. "I'll be right down."

"Oh, all right," she moaned, obviously annoyed, and padded back into the bedroom.

He returned quickly to the site of his find and rummaged around a bit more until he spotted a box of ammunition. Then, one arm burdened with the rifle and slugs, he crept softly over to the attic opening and listened for his wife.

Fairly certain she was in the bathroom, he pulled the light cord, scurried down the ladder one-handed like a monkey, and smuggled his catch into their bedroom, hiding everything in the topmost reaches of their closet behind some extra blankets. Then he folded up the ladder and shut the access panel, thankful that Matt was still asleep and that his wife was still in the bathroom.

He wondered how he was going to make it through the day without worrying about Jenny finding his cache, or noticing the additional scratch marks on the laundry room door. Fortunately, neither event occurred.

That evening, before turning in, he snuck the rifle and ammunition out of the closet and slid both items under his side of the bed keeping them well within arm's reach. If anything happened, he'd at least be ready; and he was quite certain his son wouldn't come snooping around under their bed in the middle of the night and possibly hurt himself—he just wasn't that kind of kid. Nevertheless, sleep was long in coming, and when he finally drifted off, it seemed as if only a handful of seconds had passed before he was jerked awake by the wind's howl and the erratic thudding of an open door.

Momentarily disoriented, a glance at his digital clock/radio told him it was 2:00 a.m. He sat up quietly, shaking the cobwebs out of his head, listening to the chorus of sounds dueling with the wind outside. Every so often the muffled slap of the laundry room door against the back wall dominated the symphony. *Shit! It's back!* he realized. Then, staring at his wife's form under the blankets, he thought, *Thank God she's a heavy sleeper.*

Peeling the covers off himself, he managed to inch his way slowly out of bed without disturbing her. He poked his feet into a pair of bedroom slippers and groped around under the bed for the rifle and ammunition. Then he grabbed his robe off a hook behind the door and slipped into the hall, pausing for a second to peek in on Matt. Everything seemed to be okay, but the persistent, muted smack of wood against wood urged him outside.

He stopped in the kitchen to throw the robe on over his pajamas and took some time to chamber a round in the .22, shoving a fistful of bullets into his pockets, besides.

In the relative darkness of the house he allowed himself to peer out of the back door, taking in the blustery conditions and gauging the severity of the situation. Except for the intermittent crack of wood and the wind's whine, nothing seemed to be amiss. Flicking on the patio light, he twisted the doorknob and stole outside.

It was very cold; and as he edged slowly to his right, around the front of the laundry room, waving the rifle before him, a crisp, slashing gust of wind raked across his face like a hail of razor blades. He snatched at his billowing robe, tugging it tighter around his chest, questioning the logic behind his actions. But it was too late to turn back now, he saw, his forward progress had already carried him around the corner, offering him a clear view of the laundry room's gloomy interior, and of its wind-tossed entrance door, squealing about on its hinges like a rusty gate, and rattling against the far wall with increasing, bone-jarring regularity.

It doesn't look dangerous at all, he thought.

Yet, perhaps he should have considered bringing a flashlight. Possibly, owing to the heightened sense of power the rifle imparted, he felt he didn't need it. He reached boldly into the yawning opening with his left hand and thumbed the switch.

Light cut the darkness instantly. Air rushed in and out of his lungs like a bellows while his eyes darted about the room's interior—seeing the washer, dryer, cabinets—coming up empty! *No. Wait! Something!* Just below the pulsing whir of

the electric heater and the keening sough of the wind, he was able to pick out another sound. Faint. Barely audible. A *mewling* sound. *Oh, God, no!* he thought, pressing himself into the cramped enclosure. And there, between the washing machine and the wall, lay a makeshift nest of dead leaves...and four or five baby—What? *Raccoons? Possums? Things?—*animals. *Oh, God!* he said to himself again, listening to their cries; and heard something coming for him through the grass.

Whirling around instinctively, he barely had time to bring the weapon up to eye level, sight down the barrel, as the snarling, grayish-brown blur hit the light, and squeeze the trigger. The animal dropped in its tracks as if felled by a 2 x 4, the rifle's flat report drowned out by the wind. Body frozen in place for a moment, he finally dropped the rifle to arm's length at his side, hands shaking. "Jesus Christ!" he mumbled, and walked carefully over to the fallen creature.

He gently prodded the animal with the barrel of his rifle—never even thinking that he might have to reload and shoot again if it moved—but it was dead; the bullet had struck it above the left eye and travelled directly into its brain. But what it was, he didn't know; he'd never seen anything like it! It was big—at least thirty pounds or so, he guessed—and it bore a strong resemblance to a raccoon with its unique, black facial markings; but that was it. Its body was thick, muscular, not soft and furry; its tail was so short it might as well have been nonexistent; its claws were hook-like and extremely long, much longer even than a badger's; and its wide, toothy jaw—and its *aggressiveness!*—along with the other features, suggested that either the animal was a hybrid—a combination of two or three forest creatures along the same lines—or a mutation. And that was frightening! Of course, if it was the mother of the litter presently holed up in his laundry room, just trying to find a warm, safe place for her young, its aggressiveness could be explained away... *That's what it was, he realized. A mother trying to protect her own children, her family... Exactly what I'm doing out here, too... Well, at least it's over now...*

But he did not realize that the claw marks on the laundry room door were much too large to have been made by the creature he had just shot; far too high off the ground. And as he walked over to the open room and its shuddering door—wondering how he was going to dispose of the dead animal and what he was going to do with its babies—above the rising wind, he did not hear the window shatter as the litter's enraged father ripped through the screen and punched a ragged hole in the glass; did not hear the creature's footfall as it slinked soundlessly into the bedroom; did not hear his son's wet, garbled cry as it tore out his throat; did not hear a thing—

Yet...

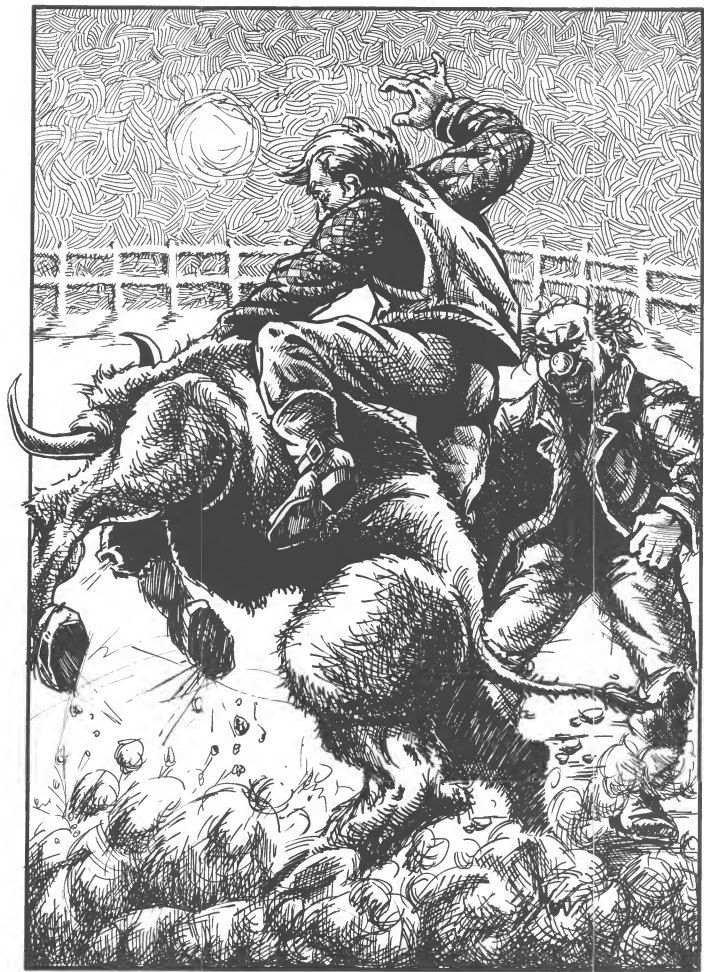
Act Now!
Before they're all gone!

Make sure to order your copy of
(the original) BEST OF THE HORROR SHOW
at half of the cover price!

Send your check today for \$4.50 (please add Illinois
state sales tax, if applicable).

Mail your order to:
2AM Publications
Box 6754
Rockford, IL 61125-1754

2
AM
5



Rodeo Clown

by Bentley Little
Copyright © 1992 Bentley Little

Patty did not like the face of the rodeo clown. She stared at the squat powerfully built man as he unloaded his props from the back of a dented blue pickup truck and piled them near the contestant's gate of the arena. Even from this vantage point she could see that his makeup was thick, much thicker than that of ordinary rodeo clowns, and his true features could not be distinguished. The black triangles which arched above his eyes lent to his painted face a perpetually evil expression and made even the traditionally benign clown's smile appear harsh and cruel. Even the man's clothes were wrong, she thought. Instead of looking baggy and comically overblown as they were supposed to, the elements of his mismatched wardrobe looked raggedy and seedy.

Patty sighed and looked toward Pete, talking with a group of local cowboys by the bucking chute. As usual, her husband was the center of attention, and he gestured wildly as he exaggerated some past rodeo exploit. She watched him for a few moments, then her eyes drifted back to the clown, now staring silently through the wide slats of the fence into the arena. She wished Ted was going to be there tonight. Pete was entered in the bull riding event, and she wanted to know that he was in good hands. But Ted had suddenly taken ill day before yesterday, and they had brought in this new rodeo clown to take his place.

She did not even know this new clown's name.

He was still staring through the slats into the arena, a mound of padded barrels, funny looking sticks and multi-colored rags and blankets around him, and Patty thought for a second about walking up to him and introducing herself, maybe telling him that Pete Bliss was her husband and asking him to take special precautions during the bull riding event to make sure Pete didn't get trampled or stomped on. But the clown looked suddenly toward her and her blood froze as she saw those horrible black triangles arched over his eyes. He was grinning, and she looked immediately away, moving from the side of the car where she stood to where Pete was regaling the locals with his stories, moving to safety.

The clown's eyes followed her as she moved, and though she didn't look at him again she could feel his hot gaze against her back.

Patty sat in the stands eating an Indian taco and drinking her fifth Coke of the night. Though it was dark, the Texas air was still very warm, and she had an unquenchable thirst. Her lower body was fairly sloshing from all the liquid she'd drunk, but her mouth was still not sated. She watched the fifth contestant in the saddle bronc event fall from his horse and saw the clown expertly fend off the animal with one of his funny looking sticks and lead the failed rider off the field.

"Let's pay that cowboy off," said a voice over the loudspeaker, and the crowd applauded.

Despite her reservations, the rodeo clown had been doing a good job, Patty had to admit. He didn't move with Ted's calm assurance, but he was fast and lithe and obviously experienced. He had already saved two, maybe three, riders from serious injury. She knew Ted would have approved of his work.

There was a short break between the saddle bronc and bull riding events as the judges tabulated the scores, and Patty made her way out of the stands and around the arena to the contestants' waiting area behind the chutes and gates and announcer's booth. She snuck up on Pete, carefully putting on his leather gloves, and threw her arms around him. She kissed his forehead, his mouth and both his cheeks. "That's for good luck," she said.

He smiled at her and kissed her back. "Thanks. I'm going to need it."

The announcer read off the names of the saddle bronc finalists, and the bull riders made their individual ways toward the series of chutes. The bulls were jumping and snorting, kicking against the wooden sides of the confining pens. One of the bulls, a big black one, almost leaped over the fence, but he got caught in the middle and a group of cowboys pushed him back down.

Patty waved to Pete, walking backward. "You're going to win," she said. "I know it."

He smiled at her. "I hope so." He turned around and jogged toward the bull pens, and Patty turned around.

Almost running into the rodeo clown.

He tipped his hat to her and gallantly stepped aside. "Scuse me, ma'am," he said. His voice was high and crazy. Patty did not know what expression he wore under the makeup, but his painted face was grinning evilly. She had a feeling that he could see right into her, that he knew what she feared, and that he would do his damndest to see that her fears came true.

She watched the clown as he walked toward the bull riders. He shook all of their hands (was he spending longer with Pete?) and then hop-skipped over to the bulls themselves. She could see that he was mumbbling something, though she could not tell what it was, and each of the huge animals grew immediately calmed as he walked by them.

"Our first contestant," said the voice over the loudspeaker, "is Joe Denny. Joe is riding Hard Luck today..."

Patty tuned the announcer out and ran around the edge of the arena to the stands. Pete had drawn third today, and she wanted to see him ride. She found her seat just as the second rider was thrown off, and the butterflies in her stomach started rolling over. She always got more nervous than Pete did before a ride. She prayed quickly, silently, that he would be all right. Her hands were sweating.

"Coming out of chute number three," the announcer said, "is Pete Bliss. Ole Pete's riding Happy Jack today; two thousand pounds of angry animal. Go get 'em, Pete!"

The crowd around her cheered, and Patty watched as if in slow motion the chute gate fly open. The bull came bucking out into the ring, and Pete held on with his left hand, his right arm held straight up in the air in perfect form. The bull danced forward and backward, arching its back, trying to throw Pete off, but he stayed on. The buzzer rang, signaling time, and he was still on the animal. Patty let out a sigh of relief. Her tense muscles relaxed.

"Pete Bliss!" the announcer said enthusiastically. "Pete Bliss in what looked like an almost perfect ride!"

Pete jumped clear of the bull, landing on the ground. But instead of helping him up and leading him off the field, the clown was dancing near the bull's head, yelling something. Pete was starting to walk toward the contestants' gate, taking off his leather gloves, when the bull suddenly turned and ran toward him. Patty stood up and yelled, as did most of the crowd, but Pete didn't hear, and the bull hit him full force in the back. Pete went down, and it looked as though the animal ran over his midsection, though it was hard to tell because of the stirred up dust.

Patty forced her way through the crowd of people in the grandstand and ran toward the contestants' gate. She could see the red light of the parked ambulance starting to flash, and she ran even faster.

She did not hear the crowd laughs, in the center of the ring, the rodeo clown did an absurdly mocking imitation of Pete getting hit by the bull.

"I can't believe he's dead."

Pete sat up in the hospital bed, kicking off the layers of white sheets, reading the obituary. He looked stricken.

Patty could not believe it either. Ted had been their friend for ten years, ever since Pete had started on the pro-rodeo circuit, and he had survived much worse than this. He had been trampled by bulls, kicked by broncs, even run over by an angry girlfriend's pickup truck. He had broken nearly every bone in his body and had lived to tell about it.

Now he was dead.

From food poisoning.

Pete turned to her, his whole body swiveling because of the neck brace. "When's the funeral?" he asked.

"Day after tomorrow."

He nodded. "I'll be out of here by then."

Patty sat down on the bed next to him. She took his hand in hers and looked into his eyes, unsure of how to say what she felt. She stared down at his calloused fingers. "I don't like the new clown," she said.

He blinked, tilting her chin up with his hand. "What?"

"If he had been doing his job properly, you wouldn't've gotten hurt," she said, trying to make her fears sound rational, trying to show him that her feelings were grounded in fact. "You had a perfect ride, you came in first, then you got trampled peacefully walking back to the gate? Don't you think that's a little strange?"

"Strange, no. Unusual, maybe. Besides, I was walking out of there on my own two feet, and in that instance the clown's responsibility is to shoo the bull out of the arena."

"Well he didn't do too good a job of that, did he?"

Pete smiled, shaking his head. "I don't understand why you're so emotional about this. I mean, I miss Ted too. But it wasn't this new clown's fault that he got food poisoning. Don't blame the guy for something he didn't do."

"I just don't like him," Patty said.

"I don't know why." Pete squeezed her hand. "He told me before the ride that he thought you were very pretty. He said he liked you a lot."

Nothing had happened that Patty could put her finger on, but life had been just abnormal enough, just off-kilter enough, that she could not put everything down to chance. Bad luck had seemed to follow her and Pete all through the rodeo circuit. There had been the trampling in Houston, and although no bones had been broken, Pete had been forced to miss both the Dallas and Phoenix rodeos. In Laramie, Pete had suffered a slight concussion after his foot got trapped in the stirrups of a saddle bronc. In Cheyenne, a bucking bronc had gone crazy and sent three cowboys to the hospital; Pete had missed being kicked himself only because she had pulled him from its path and taken refuge under a trailer. Pete had consistently drawn bad picks in every event in every rodeo he entered and had not even placed in the last two, though he was usually the top scorer.

And always the clown had been nearby.

Patty had avoided the rodeo clown, had avoided even looking at him, since that day in the Houston hospital room when Pete had told her that the clown liked her. Often she could feel his hateful gaze on her back, and sometimes she could even sense him looking at her in the stands, picking her out amongst all of the faces, but she studiously avoided him. Pete still maintained that there was nothing wrong. He admitted that he was having a string of unnaturally bad luck, but he had a legitimate, rational explanation for every incident, and Patty's fears sounded stupid and irrational even to herself.

But the clown scared her.

He was after Pete, she knew. He would not be happy until Pete was dead or out of commission for the season. But he was also after several other cowboys—a roper named Joe-Bob; Eugene Turner, another bull rider; and a calf-roper named Mack Meyers. She saw the way the clown whispered to the animals before these three rode in their events. She saw the way the clown slyly managed to look like he was dutifully doing his job while slacking off just enough to allow accidents to occur.

And she saw by the haggard expressions on the faces of these cowboys' wives and girlfriends that they too suspected something was wrong.

But she did not talk about her fears with them, and they did not confide in her.

Patty stared through the windshield at the setting sun, an orange globe obscured by dark desert clouds. They would be in Prescott by dawn, and in two days the last rodeo on the circuit would be history. She looked through the back window at the convoy behind them. Many of the rodeo riders travelled together, taking turns honking and passing each other and talking on the CBs. It made the long trips across these vast western deserts a little less boring.

She realized suddenly that she had never seen the clown's truck anywhere on the highway. All summer it had never passed them and they had never passed it. She wondered how he got from rodeo to rodeo. He always seemed to be the last person to leave and the first one to arrive.

She poured a cup of coffee from the green thermos at her feet and gave it to Pete to keep him awake. He accepted it gratefully. "Thanks," he said.

She looked at him. "Pete?"

"Yeah?" He blew on his coffee and took a sip.

She was about to say something about the rodeo clown, but she decided against it. It would only lead to an argument, and she didn't feel like arguing. "Promise me you'll be careful," she said instead. "At Prescott."

"Of course," he said, reaching for her hand and squeezing it. "I'm always careful."

"This is it."

Patty lowered her compact at the high, crazy sound of the voice and looked up.

The rodeo clown was standing directly in front of her, staring at her.

She felt her heart rate accelerate, her pulse speed up. A bolt of wild fear shot through her body and she had a sudden desire to run. He was standing in the dirt right before her, in front of the snack stand, chewing on a sno-cone. This close, she could almost make out the face of the real man beneath the makeup. But she did not like that real face any better. She could see by the eyes, encased in their evil black triangles, and by the mouth, cruelly following the contours of the painted smile, that the man was unstable, unbalanced, perverse.

Crazed.

She turned immediately away, looking in vain for a familiar face in the strolling crowd, but the clown put his hand on her shoulder. His grasp was light, experienced. "This is the last show on the circuit."

The clown smiled without showing any teeth, but when he spoke she could see them quite clearly.

It looked like they had been filed into fine points.

Patty jerked away from him coldly, trying not to let her fear show. "Please stay away from me," she said.

The clown chuckled, a wild, uncontrolled sound.

She started walking away, not looking back. Afraid to look back.

"This is it," the clown repeated, and his voice was low. "Pete's last show."

Pete's last show. The words echoed in her mind as she walked away, and she thought, for the first time in a long time, of Pete's words in the Houston hospital: *"He said he likes you a lot."*

And she shivered as she walked beneath the hot Arizona sun.

"...Let's pay that cowboy off!" The announcer's voice echoed through the PA speakers mounted on the log poles of the grandstand, and Patty wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans, knowing that Pete's ride was next. She did not have a perfect

view of the arena, but she could see between the two heads in front of her that the clown was kneeling before the gate to chute three, whispering something. The clown stood up, then stared directly at her. He tipped his oversized cowboy hat in her direction.

"No," Patty said, standing up. "No." She should not have let Pete ride. She should have told him about the clown. She pushed her way through the seated spectators toward the grandstand exit. It was her fault. If anything happened to Pete it was her fault.

"And here he is...Coming out of chute number three...Pete Bliss!"

The crowd roared its approval, and Patty stumbled toward the contestants' area, tears of anger and frustration running down her cheeks, obscuring her vision. "No!" she yelled.

Crying, sobbing, Patty climbed the fence to see into the arena. Pete was holding onto the drawstring for dear life, his face a mask of fear, as the rampaging bull bucked and ran near the edge of the far fence, trying to throw him off. The clown was dancing alone in the empty center of the dirt arena, mimicking Pete's ride. Interspersed with the claps and cheers of the audience as they rooted for Pete, she could hear the laughs of spectators watching the rodeo clown.

"Help him!" Patty yelled as loud as she could, sobbing. "Please, Jesus, help him!"

A couple of men were trying to climb down into the arena to aid Pete's attempts to dismount. But the bull chased them back up the fence. Three other men entered through the main gate on horseback and tried to ride next to Pete and the bull, trying to allow Pete the opportunity to jump animals, but the clown barred their way, comically waving a red flag in front of the horses as though he were a bullfighter.

Pete's head hit the fence and he went down.

Patty screamed as one of the bull's hooves hit her husband in the face.

The clown stared at the scene, holding up his hands in exaggerated mock horror. He did a crude bull imitation, and many people in the audience laughed.

"A hard fall for Pete Bliss," the announcer said. "But it looks like he'll be okay."

It looked like no such thing. Patty ran into the arena to where her husband's body lay unmoving. There was a crowd of cowboys already around him, slapping his cheeks, patting his arms, moving his legs, trying to revive him. She fell in the dirt next to his head and looked at his face. His skin was white, pale, dead. She began kissing him, crying.

She felt a light hand on her shoulder.

The fear, anger and revulsion she felt as that familiar touch registered in her brain caused Patty to sit straight up. She turned around and looked into the horrid face of the clown. His eyes were moving up and down her body appreciatively. "He might be okay," the clown said in his high, wild voice.

His meaning was clear.

The clown's hand caressed her upper arm.

Patty hesitated only a fraction of a second. "No," she said, pulling away from him. "I don't think he will."

(Continued on page 30)

Ura

by Alix Munro
Copyright © 1992 Alix Munro

I thought they were magic, then, my Uncle Eddie and Aunt Ura. It was the fall of 1956 and I was six-going-on-seven.

Aunt Ura was—The word “enchanting” comes closer to saying it than any other. Oh, I’ve met many as pretty, and some as kind, but Aunt Ura was special. Joy, faithful as a lap dog, trailed after her wherever she went. In her company, the sad smiled, the sour laughed, and even dire pessimists found the world a better place than ever they thought it could be.

She was small and blond, quick but neat in all her actions, like a bird. My Grandma (Uncle Ed’s mother) said she “sang like a bird,” too, but that wasn’t true. No mere bird ever sounded so fine.

In fact, the only ugly thing about Aunt Ura was her given name: Ursula. She’d been born on that saint’s feast day to two very prosaic, if pious, parents.

Perhaps because she and Uncle Eddie had no children of their own, she spoiled us, her husband’s nieces and nephews, at every opportunity. She always found time to tell tales full of brave knights and bold quests, funny leprechauns and fair ladies; to answer a question or settle a quarrel. Or, best of all, to sing for us.

Everybody loved her. Even Grandma, a woman never satisfied with anything anyone did or was, found no fault with Aunt Ura.

My Uncle Eddie was a local hero—“Lucky” Eddie Doyle. By itself, his real silver star (the Philippines, 1944) displayed in a case behind the bar in his tavern, The Silver Star, would have been enough to cement his reputation. But there was more.

Twice Uncle Eddie frustrated armed robberies by adroit use of the sawed-off Louisville Slugger he kept under the bar. In one case, the would-be robber began with a blade in his hand and finished with a fracture in his arm. In the other, the thief, waving a Saturday night special, got the money—and then stupidly turned his back on Uncle Eddie to walk out. In addition to a prison term, the robber got a two-month stay in the hospital to recover from his multiple concussions. Once, I overheard an elderly “regular” from the “oude sod” (He said he was, anyway) inform an obnoxious newcomer, “Eddie Doyle fears neither man nor beast nor God nor Devil, and *sure* not the likes of you.”

In spite of his reputation, Uncle Eddie doted on kids. On request, he cheerfully interrupted anything “grown-up” he was doing, pulled a harmonica from his shirt pocket, and played for us. Everyone in earshot—not just the children—danced when he played a jig and even men who “couldn’t dance” got up and tried. Old timers told the astounding story of the evening Rocky Steiner, a neighborhood bully whose “stone face matched his granite heart,” leaped to his feet and capered like a spring lamb to one of Uncle Eddie’s tunes.

But better still, Uncle Eddie accompanied Aunt Ura when she sang, especially Irish ballads. “Danny Boy,” Aunt Ura’s

favorite, was so moving notorious “hard guys” weren’t ashamed to be seen in tears.

Uncle Ed told us stories, too, but instead of Aunt Ura’s knights, fairies, princesses and leprechauns, his tales concerned gamblers, gangsters, *gonifs*, and “geegoes”. Some years later, I discovered that most of his stories were really Damon Runyan’s, though several must have been original with Uncle Eddie. At least, I never found another source for them, so I suppose he must have made them up himself. In particular, I still recall his story about “Da Biggest Big Boss”, who could give you your heart’s desire—but would only if you paid his price or won it from him on a bet.

With her usual talent for ignoring any fact that had the temerity to conflict with her prejudices, Grandma insisted that Uncle Ed, her second-born (between Uncle Mike and Aunt Kate), was “high-strung,” because of his “artistic temperament”; because he sometimes read for pleasure, a “sure sign he thinks too much”; and because, “No normal man worships the ground his wife walks on like that.”

By early November of 1956, I was looking forward to my seventh birthday party, set for the following Saturday afternoon. Aunt Ura and Uncle Ed had promised to come, as had five of my “very best” friends from St. Elizabeth’s Grammar School. I’d already seen brightly wrapped packages at the back of the hall closet and waited for what I was sure would be “the best birthday party ever.”

I never had that party. On the Wednesday before my birthday, a junkie-turned-robber held up Uncle Ed’s tavern. He waited until Uncle Ed went back to the storeroom for another case of beer, leaving Aunt Ura alone at the cash register. She was shot and killed instantly.

I went to the funeral with my folks on the day that was to have been my birthday party. My baby brother Terry and I were brought along at the last minute. Our folks had planned on leaving us with our usual sitter, since Terry was cutting a new tooth and was very irritable, but the sitter called that morning to tell us her own children had the flu.

At the funeral home, we filed past the coffin in the traditional “last farewell” before it was closed for the last time. The mortuary’s sound system had replaced the usual hymns with a mixture of Irish ballads, by whose request I still don’t know. I’m grateful, though, that someone thought of it. Aunt Ura loved those ballads, and it seems strangely appropriate that my last sight of her was accompanied by her favorite, “Danny Boy.”

Aunt Ura looked as beautiful as ever, a credit to the embalmer. Hers was the only corpse I’ve ever seen that really did “look natural.” I couldn’t believe she was dead. She certainly didn’t *look* dead.

“She is not dead, but sleeping,” whispered Grandma from her inexhaustible store of clichés for all occasions.

I thought she only spoke the truth.

When the attendants shut the coffin lid, I was shocked. *Don't they know she can't breathe in there?* I wondered.

The cortege to the cemetery was as close to hell as I ever want to be. Mom was busy trying to soothe Terry's teething grumbles while she mopped at her own tears. Dad, who was driving, had his rigid look, the one he only had when he was badly upset and determined not to show it. But the muscle at the corner of his left eye twitched, and he kept blowing his nose, steering one-handed, muttering, "Darn hay fever." He didn't fool anyone.

As for me, I was so miserable I couldn't even cry. All I could do was huddle protectively around the vacuum in my stomach, thinking, *"They all think she's dead. Please God make her wake up. If You don't, they'll BURY her. Please, God."*

Grandma, who'd cadged a ride with us, kept up a monologue all the way. "It's a real shame about Ura. My favorite in-law," (contemptuous glance at Dad) "and the Lord took her from me. He works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, so I guess—George! You didn't signal that turn!—Now what was...?"

"Oh, yes. Did you ever see so many flowers? What a waste of money! And the nerve of Some People! After all, I'm her own mother-in-law, and if I'm happy with some carnations, what business is it of all those people Who Aren't Even Related to send blankets of roses and—George! Will you slow down!—Where was I?"

"Oh, yes. You don't think poor Eddie picked out that fancy casket himself, do you? He's in no condition; he should've asked me to do it. I wouldn't let that undertaker take advantage of me, like he did poor—George! I told you *slow down!* Don't you ever listen?—But really, what a waste of money, all that satin lining and carved wood—it'll just rot, you know."

Had there been fewer flowers and a plain pine coffin, Grandma would have complained about the lack of respect for the dead.

"George! Watch where you're going! I swear, you'd think a grown man your age—LOOK OUT FOR THAT TRUCK! Are you blind?"

"Honestly, Pat," she turned to Mom, "don't you know how to keep a baby quiet? I raised six, and I never had any trouble from any of you. I warn you, if you're not careful, that cranky baby will grow up just as useless as that lazy lump of a daughter of yours." She paused to glare at me.

And so on, and on.

Finally, we reached the cemetery and walked to the grave site. With growing horror, I saw the coffin lowered into the ground, the first shovelful of dirt thrown on it. *How can they pile dirt on Aunt Ura? She'll wake up down there and not be able to get out!*

I moaned, then wailed, terrified for Aunt Ura—until Grandma clouted me across the top of my head with her purse and snapped, "You're hysterical! Stop making a spectacle of yourself!"

There's nothing like a dose of fury to smother fear and bring back common sense. I stood quietly for the rest of the

service.

Mom was livid, grief momentarily forgotten, as she glowered at Grandma.

Dad prudently arranged for Grandma to ride back with Uncle Mike's family.

It took the combined efforts of my parents and the nuns at St. Elizabeth's to convince me that Aunt Ura was *not* the body in the coffin; that her soul was "with God"; that she still lived apart from her body, which the "real" Ura had discarded. While her "remains" might rot (revolting thought), Aunt Ura herself lived forever through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, Our Lord. "He that believeth in Me shall never die."

I became resigned to the fact that I could never, so long as I lived, see my Aunt Ura again. I learned that communication with the dead is impossible, and that belief in it is contrary to Church doctrine, and therefore heretical. Even to wish for it shows a revolt against God's natural order, a lack of humility, and is thus sinful. The best—indeed, the only—thing I could do for Aunt Ura was pray for her soul in Purgatory.

I spent a lot of time on my knees that winter.

Uncle Eddie, in Grandma's words, "took it hard." He'd gone through the funeral like a sleepwalker, moving when nudged or led, standing or sitting wherever he'd last been guided, his eyes fixed forward in an unfocused stare. I don't think I saw him blink at any time during the funeral.

The following Monday, he cleaned out both his bank accounts—business and personal—and vanished.

Grandma wanted to call the police. She was perfectly certain he'd had a "nervous breakdown" and would "hurt himself"—her euphemism for commit suicide. "I always knew he was high strung," she declared loudly.

But Uncle Mike argued her out of it. As he explained to Dad, "Ed probably just can't stand the sight of his place, and went off somewhere for a toot. It'll do him good. Anybody keeps a bar more 'n ten years and drinks nothing but 7-Up." (Here Uncle Mike's face was a study in disgust.) "needs a binge, even without... you know."

A month after his disappearance, Grandma got a postcard from Ed, sent from, of all bizarre places, Las Vegas. The picture on the face of the card was of a huge orange bird standing in front of a luxury hotel/casino with "Flamingo" on its marquee. The reverse side read:

Hi, Ma,

Just writing to tell you I'm fine. I got some business to take care of, then I'll be home. See you in 2-3 months.

Love, Ed

Grandma looked somewhat relieved, even while she passed the card around and asked, "What business? What in the world is Ed doing in Las Vegas? What hairbrained scheme has he got into now?"

When the card reached Uncle Mike, his eyes widened, but all he said was, "I dunno what's up, either."

Sometime in March, Mom got a phone call from Grandma. Mom's expression telegraphed astonishment and dismay. She

said, "But, Ma, he can't have. It hasn't even been four months yet... Yes, of course. I'm sure George will agree. We'll pick you up and we can all go over together."

Mom hung up the phone, then dialed quickly.

"Hello, George? I'm sorry to bother you at work, but Ma called and... Yes, dear, she does need a ride someplace, but I think you'll be interested in the reason. Ed's back.... No, in the apartment over the tavern.... No, that's not all. He told Ma he got married again... How would I know if he's in his right mind? I haven't seen him yet. That's why I want to get over there... Yes, that'd be just fine... No, I don't think I can get the sitter that fast. We'll have to take Susie and Terry... Darling, of course we can't leave a seven-year-old child home alone with a year-old baby... Yes, dear. See you around three, then."

The ride to Uncle Ed's was so pleasant, the day so clear and bright, that I almost forgot the purpose of the visit. Terry slept peacefully in Mom's arms all the way, and even Grandma limited her remarks to, "What kind of cheap floozy would marry a man she's only known a month or two? She's some gold-digger who got her hooks into poor Ed when he was still in a state of shock, I just know it. Well, I'll give her a piece of my mind!"

No small threat, that.

By four o'clock, we were climbing the back stairs to Uncle Ed's second-floor apartment. Dad knocked.

Uncle Ed answered, looking like someone recovering from a bout of pneumonia: worn and drawn but cheerful and alert. He invited us inside and called over his shoulder, "Honey, come on out. Here's some of my family I want you to meet."

At the end of the long shotgun hall that ran to the front of the building, my Aunt Ura stepped out of the kitchen and smiled.

Mom gasped.

Dad muttered, "My God," left eyelid twitching. It was as close as he ever came to swearing in front of his children.

Grandma crossed herself.

Terry snoozed on in Mom's arms.

And I fainted for the first and only time in my life.

As I came out of it, I saw some differences between this woman—"Dixie," Uncle Ed murmured—and my beloved Aunt Ura, but in a strange way, like a double exposure. Aunt Ura's voice had been a sweet, clear soprano. Dixie's voice was a gravelly low alto. (*Did that grave dirt run down her throat and choke her?*) Aunt Ura had moved like a hummingbird, with a quick, darting grace. Dixie moved heavily, awkwardly. (*Did she have to lie still in that coffin so long her arms and legs went to sleep?*) Yet, there were Aunt Ura's eyes, her hair, her shape, her smile, even her chipped tooth, all being worn like a Halloween costume by a stranger named Dixie.

Gradually, my head cleared and I realized that, while amazingly close, the resemblance wasn't perfect. Dixie's hair and skin were both slightly coarser than Ura's. Dixie's eyes were a lighter blue, seeming faded, and her smile revealed that the chipped tooth was on the left side of her mouth, not the right. But most of all, Dixie lacked Ura's sparkle, her infectious joy.

We beat a hasty retreat as soon as I'd recovered. Grandma, for once in her life, had been shocked literally speechless, and

stayed with us for several days, recovering her composure and her voice.

Once Grandma "got un-discombedulated," she started wondering how, where, and under what circumstances Uncle Ed had found such a "real dead ringer" for Aunt Ura. Speculation soon spread through Mom's whole family, and theories ranged from Uncle Mike's reasonable, if laconic, "pure luck" through Grandma's intricate plots which involved everyone and everything from the FBI and the Mafia to the Devil and all his minions.

No one quite had the gall to ask Uncle Ed outright, and neither he nor Dixie ever volunteered the information. He seemed—and still seems—just the same as ever, except that he doesn't play the harmonica anymore. He told anyone who asked that he'd lost it, but I noticed he never bought another.

Eventually, of course, the questions died away, each person privately providing himself with the answers he likes best, and Dixie is accepted simply as Uncle Ed's second wife.

"I say she was a loose woman, and they don't want us to know," my Aunt Kate, the perpetuator of Grandma's opinions unto a new generation, says to this day. Aunt Kate fondly believes that she is muttering such remarks under her breath. In reality, she is clearly audible in the next room, but no one can convince her to wear her hearing aid.

Such comments have no effect on Ed and Dixie—I don't think they really care what people like Aunt Kate think.

Uncle Ed and Aunt Dixie re-opened The Silver Star, which enjoys a thriving business to this day. The real silver star (The Philippines, 1944) still sits in its glass case behind the bar and seems to shine with a light of its own. (Aunt Kate insists, "Ed must've done something to it. It's not natural for metal to glow like that.")

Uncle Eddie and Aunt Dixie, both in their seventies now (though neither of them look it), are very happy together. Dixie, in fact, seems to be a walking advertisement for the rejuvenating effects of happiness, and truly doesn't look any older than she did the first time I met her.

Aunt Kate, in an effort worthy of Grandma, observed, "Of course Dixie doesn't look a day older since she married Ed. If I spent as much money on makeup and hair dye and such as she does, I'd look young and beautiful too." (Myself, I wouldn't bet on that.)

It's almost like one of my Aunt Ura's fairy tales, "And they both lived happily ever after."

I think I'm the only one who's noticed Dixie's habit of humming very softly, always the same tune, while she's working—polishing glasses or peeling potatoes. She smiles then, a sweet, nostalgic smile. Her limited, raspy voice makes the tune hard to identify, but if you listen carefully, you can make it out.

It's "Danny Boy."

For years now, I've told myself it's just a song, and I'm too old for superstitious nonsense.

But it scares the hell out of me, anyway.

** 2AM **

Body and Soul

by James K. Van Lydegraf
Copyright © 1992 James K. Van Lydegraf

An insistent pounding reverberated through the room. Father Dominic looked over to the heavy oaken door, its color bled dry by the flat, fluorescent lighting. *Some costs, he thought, just aren't worth cutting.* Still, a vow of poverty is a sacred thing. Dominic rose from his chair, ignored the rules, and instead of peering through the small hole, swung the door wide open. The generous late-morning sun of the California spring poured over the shoulders of the man standing on the cement porch and gave life back to the wood of the door. Shadows pooled on the man's face, obscuring his features, but still, Dominic recognized him instantly.

"Brother Lucas! Come in! Come in!" Lucas actually was Dominic's brother, not a fellow clergyman, but it was an old and worn joke of the priest's to talk as if the opposite were true. He stood aside and let Lucas enter.

They stood alone in the common room. The other priests were out ministering to the parish's various needs, but Dominic was still in the rectory because his duties had been lightened as his years advanced, until he was nearly in retirement.

The two men exchanged pleasantries and remarked on how kind the weather was to men of their ages, Dominic joking that it was sure to turn sour now that they had discussed it. After a moment's awkward silence, Lucas' face lost its customary joviality. "I didn't come just to visit," he said.

Dominic set down his coffee cup and leaned forward. He clasped his hands together. His face held the intent, earnest, accepting expression that had carried forty years of sinners through confessions both simple and hard. It was an expression born out of a faith which had not been shaken once in Dominic's life. It was an expression most psychiatrists would have sold their souls to duplicate.

"I'm worried about Trisha," Lucas' granddaughter, Dominic's godchild. "She's gotten involved in a... well, a movement." Trisha was seventeen and for several years had been fighting the war of faith versus evidence. She was trapped in what Dominic called *The Lie of Science*. Faith was not enough, the *Lie* claimed, truth had to be subject to repetition under adverse conditions.

"What is this movement?"

"I wish you'd come see for yourself. It sounds much more harmless than it seems."

"Let's go, then."

Trisha's house was a common tract home built shortly after World War II. It would have fit anywhere in America, and only the fruit-laden orange tree on the front lawn tagged it as Californian. Trisha was at school and her parents both at work, so Lucas used his key to let them in.

"You still haven't told me what Trisha's involved in..."

"I'll show you." Lucas led his brother through the living room to the family room, in the back. The room had been added

by Trisha's parents and there was a step down when you entered.

An enormous throw rug that for years had lent the room a sort of homely charm, was now rolled up and pushed against the brick back of the living room fireplace, as it would have been at a dance party for Trisha and her friends. To Dominic's knowledge it had never before been left rolled, even to the morning after such a party, let alone till the next afternoon.

There was a free standing set of shelves, on which was arrayed a modest collection of home electronics. The centerpiece, as was common nowadays, was a VCR which was hooked to a twenty-six inch TV, and several tapes sat out on top of the player. Lucas picked one up and tossed it to his brother. Dominic had never been able to break Lucas of that habit, but he had learned to catch just about anything that came lofting his way. He looked at the tape. It was one of Jane Fonda's workouts. He caught another. It was a video by Jack LaLanne. Then Richard Simmons. Then others, less famous. Some of them were hand-labeled, some were pre-recorded, but all were exercise tapes.

Dominic looked at the stack of tapes he had made and then at his brother. "I don't understand..."

"She's obsessed. She doesn't think of anything else."

"Exercise is good for you, Lucas. I could do with a little more myself. A fit body and a fit mind are the complement of a fit soul."

"I'm not talking about fitness, Dom, I'm talking about full-fledged obsession." Lucas opened his mouth, but he hesitated, looked down to the ground, seemed to wrestle with the need to go on. His brother waited, calmly, acceptingly. Finally Lucas looked up and said, "I think she's possessed!"

"By what? A demon of exercise? You sound as mad as you want me to believe of Trisha."

"You know my faith, Dom. I don't make this accusation lightly. Wait till after school. You'll see."

So they waited. At nearly three-thirty, as they sat drinking tea in the living room, they heard a key in the door.

"Uncle Dom," Trisha cried out as soon as she saw him. She rushed across to him, as he stood, and gave him a big hug. Dominic noticed the way she was dressed. She wore spandex pants under a close fitting pair of jogging shorts. Her top was a t-shirt cut off level with her belly-button. Her breasts seemed flatter than Dominic remembered, but as she hugged him close he realized it was because under her shirt she wore a constricting tube top for support. On her wrists and ankles she wore weights in colored plastic bands. Her hair was tied back. There was a clean, faint smell of fresh sweat about her.

"I've gotta do my routine, Uncle Dom, but you can come in the back and talk to me while I'm going through it." Without waiting for an answer, Trisha hopped down the step into the family room, and the two older men followed her back.

Without preamble she dropped to the floor and began a series of slow stretching exercises. Dominic took a seat and watched, while Lucas stayed by the door.

After a few minutes she got up and went to the VCR. She stood and looked around the shelves for a few moments, then glanced around the rest of the room. Her eyes fell on the stack of tapes which Dominic had left on the small end table. She crossed over and scooped them up, glancing at Lucas with a disturbed expression on her face.

She popped one of the tapes in the machine and turned on the TV. She left the sound off. Then she came back to the center of the floor. Instead of the TV, she faced her two uncles.

"It takes a lot of time for me to go through this, so you can go ahead and talk to me. You don't have to wait till I'm done."

Dominic glanced at the tube and saw the tape starting was the Jane Fonda. With her back to the display and the sound off, Trisha began doing the exercises in precise synchronization with the ladies on screen. To Dominic it seemed the women on the TV must be able to see out, that it must be them who were following the lead of his great-niece, since she could not see what they were doing.

As the routine continued, Dominic and Trisha talked about how she was doing in school. They discussed her parents. Trisha brushed off questions about boyfriends, saying it had been some time since she had had one. She talked about how she had stopped eating red meat; a proper combination of legumes and grains, she explained, gave the same combination of amino acids without the heavy load of cholesterol. She had tried dance class for a while but hadn't been satisfied the routines they taught her administered evenly to all of her muscles. She didn't want to neglect any part of her body. Dominic asked if she took care to balance her education of mind and soul with that of her body. She laughed. Dominic pressed the point. She asked him to come and join in her exercises.

The first tape had just ended and Trisha pulled it out of the player and put in another. She explained to Dominic that this one had an easier series of exercises that she used as a breather between her other tapes, so it would be a perfect starter for him. He took off his shoes and stuffed his socks inside them. He settled down onto the cool tile floor and went through the warm-up stretches which Trisha showed him. Her arms and face glistened with a thin film of perspiration. She leaned back, stretched her arm out, her toes reaching forward for balance, and hit Play. The second tape started.

Dominic could easily keep track of which exercise he was to be doing. Over Trisha's shoulder he could see the TV, Trisha herself was always in perfect sync with the tape, and whenever there was a shift she gave him quick instructions on what was coming up. He asked her again about her mind and soul.

"That's why aerobics are so important, Uncle Dom. Just exercising isn't enough. You have to do the right ones and in the right balance. Aerobics get the blood flowing and carrying more oxygen, so the brain gets fed better than ever before."

He noticed her voice getting hoarse as she kept talking and exercising. It disturbed Dominic to hear her usually bright and lofty tones becoming low and guttural.

They were doing something that was not quite running in

place. Dominic's knees rose high, considering his age. He was in good shape. Trisha's knees rose to nearly touch her breasts and then, before they dropped back down, she gave a little kick so her feet lifted level with her eyes.

"But what about your soul?" he persisted.

"I haven't got time."

Dominic stopped. He stared at his great-niece. For a few moments his mind was blank. "You haven't got time?"

She picked up the pace of the exercise she was doing. For every repetition on the TV she did two. She bounced first on one foot then the other. It looked like some primal native dance. Her voice came out of the depths of her throat, low and animal, "It takes a constant watch to maintain a perfect body. The flesh fights. There are many temptations: Food. Rest. Friends. Relatives. They all try to drag you down, to cut into time which should be spent in communion with the body."

She spun around. So fast her head seemed almost to stay facing forward while her body whirled underneath, independently.

"God gave you that body. He wants you to care for it, but not to the exclusion of all else in your life. 'For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit,' Galatians 5: 17."

"Let his flesh become fresher than in youth, let him return to the days of his youthful vigor; then he will pray to God and he will accept him." Job 33: 25-26."

Dominic was taken aback. Trisha, as far as he knew, had never studied the Bible, and certainly had never quoted scripture to him. He covered his surprise by continuing the aerobics. "What drives you in this?" he asked.

"What drives you, Uncle Dom? What is it you're trying to find out? Are you wondering if I dance with demons, or if I'm doing jumping jacks for Jesus?" She leaned her head back and laughed. It was a raw, frightening sound, the kind of laugh a demon might make as it tore out the throat of one of God's chosen.

"Yes, I wonder. Do you?"

"Do I what, Uncle Dom? I don't know what you ask me." Her eyes were wide, her nostrils flared, like a beast sniffing its prey.

"Where is your soul, Trisha?"

"Devoured and digested." Again she laughed.

"No! Not yet. Not as long as you live has your soul's fate been decided. Let me save yours."

Trisha spat on the floor. "You haven't got the stamina Old Man. Would you really race with the Devil at your age?"

"At any."

Suddenly Trisha spun on her heel and rocketed out of the room. She pushed Lucas to the side as she passed through the door. Dominic charged after; then, some moments later, so did Lucas.

They ran out of the house and across the lawn. Trisha was halfway down the block by the time Dominic saw which way she had gone. He tucked his elbows in and his head down, tried to remember everything from when he had run track for the seminary, so many decades before. His bare feet pounded against the pavement, but he ignored the pain. The thought crossed his mind that this might all be a game which Trisha was

playing, to see how far she could push him, but the memory of her inhuman guttural voice convinced him. He pushed on.

He could see Trisha was already pacing herself. She was not trying to keep him from catching up. She had only used her moments of surprise to gain some initial ground, to force Dominic to sprint to catch up. How he could ever hope to keep up with her he didn't know. She was forty years his junior and had been maintaining a rigorous program of exercise. *The Lord is my shepherd I shall now run.* Dominic shook his head, amazed he could joke at a time like this. But his lungs did seem to ease up and he knew God was with him, that he would not fight alone.

He glanced over his shoulder, just before he caught up to Trisha, and saw Lucas slow up and stop. Lucas leaned over and put his hands on his knees.

"Not bad for an old man," was how Trisha welcomed him to her side.

"You aren't the only one who eats right," he panted, "and God is on my side."

"But it's not a relay race; you can't hand him the baton."

"He lends me his strength."

Trisha laughed. Still, she kept up her pace.

They turned a corner. A block ahead, Dominic could see a park.

"Trisha, why do you provoke an old man like me?"

"Don't call me Trisha."

"Why not?"

"Trisha is only a mask. You know I am not your niece, why play the game?"

"Who are you?"

She leaned her head back and laughed. The scratchy, coughy sound rose towards the heavens.

Dominic's lungs felt as if the air he breathed were on fire. His throat felt ready to tear. His side was sliced with pain. Not just the soles of his feet but the bones also shrieked each time they slammed against the pavement. It was hard to concentrate, hard to force his mind to turn to any thought other than just keeping his balance and pushing his feet forward, taking each step against every instinct which screamed its demands at his numbing mind. He reached a hand out, put it on Trisha's shoulder. He didn't know if he hoped she might feel some compassion and slow down, or if he thought the extra weight might hold her back some, or if it might upset her balance and spill her to the ground. He didn't know anything except five minutes more at this pace and his heart and lungs would surely explode and shatter his ribs from the inside out and thrust unwanted rest upon him.

And they had only run three blocks.

When his hand touched her, something erupted inside his mind. He had never believed in or even given much thought to ESP, telepathy, the ability of one mind to reach out and contact another. He had always figured such things were the province of God and the Other, not of man. So now he knew one of them was involved. The foul reek that came into his head made it clear which.

They turned into the park. Onto a running path. Gravel bit and tore at Dominic's raw soles. His breath caught in his throat.

He made a sound like the dying cough of an old, old man who had for too long refused treatment for pneumonia, a sound which in a radio play would have been a man being turned inside out by someone reaching down through his throat, grabbing hold of the very bottom of his stomach and pulling with all the strength Samson had had before Delilah had had his hair cut.

Trisha stopped running. Where she stopped, a sign told them they were on a fitness trail. Dominic pitched forward onto the ground and lay gasping and heaving. The sign said to do ten deep knee bends. Trisha counted each as she did them. She did twenty.

When she had finished, the fire in Dominic's throat had relaxed. With every breath he felt only as if he were swallowing hot coals. Coals which his feet wore he had just walked across and which had stuck to their bottoms.

"Come on, Dom." Trisha grabbed one of his hands and yanked him to his feet, hard enough to make his shoulder feel like his arm had been pulled off and then stuck back on at a wrong angle. "You've been a priest too long. You've begun to think saving souls is easy." She took off again and Dominic started after.

When she had taken his hand, he had felt the presence inside her again. It was the sort of intelligence that compared to the human mind the same way a rotting bog compared to a spring meadow. Its memories were like week old food still clinging to unbrushed teeth. Its thoughts were like maggots that had crawled inside the mouth to eat away at the memories caught between the teeth.

Dominic's knees jarred with each pounding step. Sharp, angular bits of gravel ground into his feet and clung to them so they could grate into the same piece of rent flesh over and over again each time his feet slapped down onto the rough path.

They stopped again. Dominic leaned on the fitness trail sign. There were a set of parallel bars. Trisha put her hands on the bars, lifted her feet from the ground and used her hands to walk across the bars.

She grabbed Dominic by both sides of his head and lifted his face so he could see into her eyes.

The world was torn away. Dominic looked into the face of the Beast. Its eyes were deep pits, no eyeballs, just holes that dropped away into forever. Its nose was wide and squashed, as if it were a crossbreed, half-human and half-pig. The mouth was open. There were two rows of teeth on the top and three on the bottom. Its breath was the sulfurous smell of eggs rotted in the shell. It was the kind of breath that made Dominic think of dragons. He expected flames to roll down the Beast's swollen, gangrenous tongue. Then it laughed and let him go.

"Time to run again." Trisha's features and the Beast's ran together.

Dominic dropped his head and looked only at the ground. Saw only his feet plodding onward, one after the other, leaving bloody footprints behind. *For the bloodhounds to follow.* Dominic almost laughed at his joke but his lungs wailed against the effort.

Through all the pain and rage and terror, a new fear suddenly reached out and took Dominic by his collar, grabbed him and demanded his attention. There were no shadows upon

the ground. Such a small thing, such an easy thing not to notice. He lifted his head. The sky was covered with dark, heavy clouds. The type of clouds which rushed across the full moon in every bad horror film which had sent Dominic home clutching his brother's hand and saying the Hail Mary or the Lord's Prayer over and over again when he had been such a small child. The park, too, had changed. Barren trees huddled close over the rocky path. Trees whose branches were long arms with fingers reaching down. Trees whose roots snaked outward, ready to trip unwary runners. Between the trees was nothing but fog. Ground-clouds. A gray shroud which could hide anything. Yet the danger was not in the fog, it was right beside him. It was the Beast, not Trisha, which ran with Dominic.

The Beast counted cadence as they ran. The count started in English (left, left, left-right-left) but it devolved backwards, converted into the Latin which was the root of the Church, but also the language which had first expressed the evil the Church fought against. It had been many, many years since Dominic had said the Mass in Latin, but still the language was young and fresh in his mind and the intonation the Beast counted in was so right that it was quite a few paces before it struck the priest what the Latin cadence meant in English, what the Latin roots of right and left had evolved to in the modern language (sinister, sinister, sinister-dexter-sinister).

"Jesus be with me," the old priest whispered to his God.

The Beast laughed.

Another sign loomed out of the mist ahead of them. Again they stopped. This time the Beast did push-ups. It looked like something feeding.

Then they were off again. The fog was cold against Dominic's sweat-drenched skin. He wondered how long the trail went on. What waited at its end? Would he last long enough to find out?

Was he supposed to find out?

Racing was the Devil's game.

They reached another sign. This one stood by a chin-up bar.

He reached out. He grabbed the Beast by its shoulder. He pulled as hard as he could, and turned the Beast.

He wanted to speak, to issue his challenge to the Beast and end this endless running, but all he could do was drag air into the deepest recesses of his lungs, pull air into his lungs until it felt like his ribs were cracking outward to make room for all the air he hauled inside. Then he let it all out again in a great whoosh but had not even gotten half of it out before he had to drag more back in. His blood boiled like an over-heated radiator.

The Beast reached out and closed its taloned fist onto Dominic's throat, squeezed off the ragged intake of breath.

Dominic's eyes flew wide. His nostrils flared and closed, flared and closed. His veins and arteries throbbed and cried out for oxygen. He reached up and clawed at the gnarled fingers which had closed about his neck. He could not get a grip on them. He swung his fists against the Beast's hairy arm, but it only smiled its sulfurous smile.

Then Dominic suddenly calmed. The Beast, for the first time, looked uncertain. Dominic's lungs stopped heaving against his constricted windpipe's inability to pass air. He reached up with both hands and tore open his shirt. The buttons

popped and fell to the ground. Dominic grabbed hold of his undershirt. His arms were sore, but he gripped the fabric with all his strength. *Lord be with me*, he silently prayed, and pulled the thin cloth. But it would not tear. His lungs tried to heave, to pull in the air with which Dominic would scream his rage. Then one of his fingers ripped through the shirt and with renewed strength he tore it open also, tore it all the way up to his neck. And underneath the undershirt was the object he sought.

Dominic took hold of the small cross which lay against his chest. The small gold crucifix which was the only thing his mother had left him that he had not given to charity. It felt hot in his hand. It fought back the cold of the fog. He yanked down and snapped the fine gold chain that looped around his neck. He pushed the crucifix against the Beast's wrist. The Beast released his neck and jerked its hand away. It made a snuffling sound and closed its mouth over its wrist, like a small child sucking the blood off a scratch.

A small section of cloud parted and a shaft of sunlight beamed down on them. A spotlight from heaven.

Dominic took his first easy, deep breath since the run had begun. He felt the oxygen rush into his bloodstream and course outward to all of his muscles. The sunlight glinted off his crucifix. The glow of it spread up his arm and across the rest of his body. He was a warrior and his armor was the Light of God. He flexed his arms. He bent and straightened his knees. Even the screaming pain of his feet backed down in the light, subsided to a dull throb, always there, but always in the background.

The Beast only waited. It was watchful, but made no advance. It seemed to study the priest, as if wondering what Dominic's next move would be. Or perhaps wondering why the Father had shown his reserves of strength and faith now.

The backers were equal. The heavyweights were on both sides. It was the players themselves who would decide the fate of the battle. It came to Dominic that that was all it was, a single skirmish in the war which had been waging forever. This was his hour in the spotlight, what he had trained for his whole life. By itself it wouldn't matter much in the final outcome of the universe, but it would matter. It would matter to Dominic; he would do his best and hope all the other players in the millennia to come would do theirs. And it would matter to Trisha, for today it was her soul on the auction block.

And the bidding was in exercises. And it was Trisha's young conditioned body, against Father Dominic's aged softness. But on some fields experience had to count for something and when God was on the field there had to be some justice, otherwise what was the point?

The Beast in Trisha's clothing grabbed hold of the chinning bar. It lifted its legs from the ground and pulled itself up, till its pox-infested chin rose over the bar. It began to repeat the maneuver. In its cracked and scarred voice it counted the repetitions. That was the essence of exercise, Father Dominic knew, stress one muscle or group of muscles, then repeat that stress until the muscle was tired. Then move on to the next exercise.

The trouble was Dominic needed not to exercise, but to exercise. Trisha had stressed aerobics over plain exercise, so Dominic supposed what he actually needed was to perform an

erobicism. He smiled at this thought. *Thank God! I haven't lost my sense of humor*, he thought. *Thank God*, which was just another way of praying. The Hail Mary, repeated over and over, was more than just chanting, it was exercising the soul. Saying a rosary was the spiritual equivalent of running the fitness trail.

"Hail Mary, full of grace,..." Dominic began. The Beast turned a baleful eye on the tired priest but continued to pull itself up on the chinning bar. Dominic brought his hands together, clasped them over the small crucifix and held them close to his heart. When he finished the brief prayer he started it over, matching his vocal repetitions against the Beast's physical ones.

Even just standing and praying Dominic felt his arms ache and seem to pulse in time to the evil creature's exercises.

Then the Beast let go of the bar and, calling Dominic along with a jerk of its head, began to run along the trail again.

Ahead the trail forked. To the one side the harsh gravel continued on, lit in the zebra pattern of light skulking between trunks and limbs of barren trees. To the other side, the trail disappeared into a forest of trees growing so close together their limbs seemed woven into a tapestry. These trees still had their leaves, but they were a dark gangrenous green, unpleasant looking and wetly glistening, as if they were slowly, slowly dissolving into slime, so they would ooze down the trunk of the tree rather than fall to the ground. Evidently, though, this was not the case, because in what little light seeped through the densely hung overgrowth, Dominic could see the ground below was covered in fallen leaves already rotting into fragrant topsoil.

As they neared the split in the paths Dominic's vision wavered and shifted in and out of focus. A bead of sweat trickled into the corner of his eye and he blinked away the sting of it. When his sight cleared the gravel side of the path had gone away and the Beast slipped into the shadowy woods.

Finding a second wind Dominic pushed hard enough to come alongside the Beast and they jogged quietly together, the only sound their rough breathing and the whisper of their bare feet against the carpet of rotting, soggy leaves.

Even against the soft ground of the forest every step brought a new stab of pain to the over-worked muscles in Dominic's thighs. And the slime from the leaves worked into the abrasions and tears in the priest's feet. He could feel it in the wounds, burning like acid, dully fizzing like salt poured onto a slug by some cruel fascinated child.

Dominic thought he heard small sounds, small voices, along the edges of the path. He tried to peer into the gloom, but at the brief lapse in his concentration he snagged his toe against a half-buried root and caught his lip between his teeth to keep from crying out in pain. His eyes adjusted down to the dim light as he ran and finally he was able to make out shapes moving around, peeking out from between the trees skirting the path as they watched the race and followed along in a deformed sideways version of leapfrog where the last of the half-human creatures would disappear back into the woods where it could be heard running along out of sight until it would reappear again at the head of the line of spectators. Somehow Dominic got it into his head that these creatures were souls caught in limbo

between Heaven and Hell and if he could win this battle today not only would he save Trisha, but in the vortex of Good's victory some one or two of these piteous little creatures might get sucked up into the grace of Heaven. And if he were to lose one or two might be dragged irrevocably into the pit of Hell.

For them, too, the battle was fought.

Dominic began to lose the rhythm of the run. His steps faltered and he had to concentrate to keep from pitching headlong into the composting leaves. Then just when he feared he could go on no further the path widened out before them and the two runners bolted into a clearing. It was like some halloween spectre of a spring meadow. Weeds and thistles were all that seemed to grow within the clearing and even these were sickly and weak. There was a streambed to one side but no water flowed, instead there was a stagnant pool of a foul brackish liquid that could have been the runoff from the slime-leaves, washed here by the last winter storm and then left when the water had all soaked into the spongy earth.

And scattered about the clearing were various exercise devices and constructions. To Dominic now, they looked as inviting as the medieval devices of torture which his church had once used in their battle to save souls and banish evil. *No one*, he thought to himself, *expects the Spanish Inquisition.*

The Beast dropped to the ground and hooked its ankles under a bar mounted low to the ground. It began to do sit-ups. Dominic felt the throb of overworked muscles across his gut. He dropped to his knees and fished the small cross from out of his pocket.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven..." The Beast struggled for a moment, having trouble completing its sit-up. Dominic continued to pray, matching repetition to repetition. He could feel the Beast's exercises in his own muscles, but it seemed in return the Beast felt Dominic's prayers.

Next it started to do jumping jacks, an exercise Father Dominic had always thought looked silly enough to have been created by the Marx brothers. Remembering this he suppressed a grin and then decided why bother and shook his head, grinning, for the moment, from ear to ear. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit of laughter, he thought to himself, but then out loud he began: "Father, you have shown me how to walk in your footsteps. You are daily transforming me..."

The Beast looked over at Dominic's smiling face and spat on the ground. It gave up on the jumping jacks and crossed to one of the machines. The dark clouds reflected off its gleaming chrome. The Beast pulled a pin from a set of weights and moved it down so that the entire stack of them was locked onto the steel cable leading to an overhead crossbar. The Beast stood under the crossbar and gripped it tight in both hands. Then without testing the weight it pulled down with all its strength. The muscles in its inhuman arms bulged. Veins stood out darkly against the hairy flesh. The creature gritted its teeth against each other hard enough that the sound carried across to where Dominic kneeled, a sound so harsh that for a second Dominic expected the teeth to break against each other, chipping and flaking their enamel into the Beast's slathering jaws.

And from across the clearing the pain reached out and

hooked into the flesh of Dominic's arms. The last vestige of his smile was torn from his face. There was no biting down on the flesh of his lips to stifle the outcry of his pain. Dominic's mouth opened wide and he screamed in agony. The Beast pulled the crossbar down behind its head, touched the smooth metal to the top of its spine. Looking across at the Beast's pose and feeling the excruciation of muscles on the verge of tearing themselves free of the bones to which they were anchored, Dominic thought for a moment that he had a hint of understanding of what Christ had gone through on the cross.

Then the Beast let back up the crossbar, let the weights back down on their cable. And then pulled them back again. Let the pain tear freshly into Dominic's sore shaking arms.

Breath hissed in through Dominic's teeth. And then with his harsh exhalation he began, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace..."

The Beast continued for a total of ten repetitions.

Then it crossed to another device, but its steps were unsure and it stopped not when it got to the machine but when it bumped into it. This one was an exercycle, and the Beast labored to climb into the saddle. It leaned forward and with evident pain lifted its arms to the handlebars.

Dominic tried to steady his breathing. He tried to slow his heart from beating wildly out of control, from pounding against his ribs, trying to break its way out of their confining cage.

The Beast began to pedal. Unlike its herculean leap into instant full power with the overhead bar, this time it started slowly. Yet by the concentration on its face as it stared steadfastly at Dominic, it seemed it put as much effort into making any start at all as any it had before.

Dominic felt the muscles in his legs twitch in rhythm to the ever faster circles the Beast's legs moved in as it put on speed. "O Holy Spirit of God, take me as your disciple. Guide me, illumine me..." As he forced the words to flow from his mouth Dominic felt them scratch at his raw throat. He coughed and hacked against the soreness, but forced himself to go on, to finish the prayer and to repeat it again.

The Beast no longer sat upright in its seat. It leaned all the way forward, laying its head down on its hands where they gripped the handlebars hard enough to turn the dark discolored flesh over the knuckles to a pale shade of grey, from cutting off part of the flow of whatever it had that passed for blood. Its eyes were still open but they were dull and lifeless, like the cataract

ridden lenses of an old, old dog. Its legs still continued to race around and around, pushing the pedals ever faster. From inside the cage where the cycle's wheel was housed sparks began to fly. Some of them flew out and landed in the sparse fur of the Beast's legs and the

hair singed and shrivelled back, but still the Beast pedaled on. A steady shower of the sparks flew out of the housing and spread across the ground but the slimy plant life was too soggy to catch.

Dominic's legs twitched and ached. His throat was raw and his vocal cords so dry that the invocation he continued to utter over and over came out as little more than a scratchy whisper. Dominic had already collapsed against one of the machines but now he tilted over and let his torso drop down to the ground and closed his eyes so he could no longer even watch to see when and if the Beast would ever stop its ride into nowhere.

Dominic opened his eyes. The light was so bright he had to shield his gaze, but gradually he grew used to it and looked around. He was in a hospital room. Sitting with him was his brother Lucas.

"Brother Lucas," he never tired of the meager joke, though this time his voice was cracked and hoarse.

"Shh, quiet." Lucas came over and took Dominic's hand. "You had a heart attack. Trisha says to thank you for running with her and to tell you she's sorry it was so hard on you."

"Heart attack? But what about the... Was it just a..."

"Hush, Dominic." Lucas looked around to be sure they were alone. "It happened. Believe you me it happened. Trisha will come and visit you tomorrow."



(RODEO CLOWN--Cont'd from page 21)

The clown nodded and his eyes narrowed under the black triangles. *What was he feeling? Anger? Pain? Triumph?* "You're right," he said. His voice was flat, unemotional. He moved away.

"He's dead!" yelled one man bending over Pete. "He just stopped breathin'! Call the paramedics! Quick!"

The white suited paramedics were already running across the dirt with a stretcher, but Patty knew it was too late. The pain shot through her then. She bent down over her husband and kissed his bloody lips, crying. Her tears fell onto his cheeks, mingling with the red. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I couldn't do it. It's my fault." She kissed him again and again and again.

She held his hand as they lowered him onto the stretcher. "Pete Bliss!" the announcer said. "Let's pay that cowboy off!"

But very few people clapped as they carried Pete's body out of the arena.

They were too busy laughing at the rodeo clown as he danced a happily deranged little jig by himself in the dirt.



SPECIAL AUTHOR ADS

Authors: If you'd like to advertise your own books in the pages of 2AM, we'll typeset an ad to your specifications and provide space at substantial savings. Please write for details.

Gretta M. Anderson
2AM Magazine Author Ads
Box 6754
Rockford, IL 61125-1754

Ratso

by James S. Dorr
copyright © 1992 James S. Dorr

The weird thing was that the garbage smelled good. Ratso had always been what he'd call a fastidious man—he also hated being called "Ratso"—but, as he clawed through the moonlit rubbish heaped in the disused warehouse's yard, some of the ripest parts actually smelled good.

Marlene, though—Marlene was sweet. She called him Ratso too, but coming from her lips the name sounded okay. She was a college girl, in her second year at the Fairleigh Dickinson extension, and she'd told him she thought the name was cute. She'd told him lots of funny things like that and, even if he wasn't as tall as most other men and he'd always been skinny, she thought he was cute too.

Ratso loved Marlene.

And that was where his troubles had started. For Marlene's sake, he'd left his buddies—most of them, anyhow—even gotten a regular job at a book printing company over in Fort Lee. But then, when she'd rented a new apartment to be near her college's Teaneck campus, and he'd been helping her move the old stuff out, he'd managed to stick his hand in a dumpster and gotten a bite from what must have been the biggest, smelliest, scruffiest rat in all of New Jersey.

And, with his luck, it couldn't be just any regular rat. He sniffed the night air, twitching his nose in a way that seemed natural, and smelled something new on the warehouse grounds—one thing about what had happened to him, it had made all his senses a lot more keen. No, the rat he'd been bitten by had been like in those wolfman movies on TV. A were-something—were-rat? Marlene, who was smart, could have probably told him its proper scientific name.

He followed the smell and came to a dusty, broken out window next to a loading dock by the river. Marlene could have probably explained it to him, about what had happened, except there are some things a man doesn't tell to even his best girl—especially when he's named something like Ratso. Like—now he heard whispering from inside the warehouse—like how, every full moon ever since the night he'd been bitten, he'd had to take his clothes off and hide them because, if he didn't, they'd get all messed up when he changed into a rat.

"You sure you weren't followed?"

He climbed, silently, up to the window's ledge. When he was little, he'd gotten his nickname not just for his size, but also because people said his eyes were beady—the eyes he now used to peer inside. The name had stuck, even if, by now, he was almost pushing thirty years old. The man who'd just spoken, however, looked more like he was pushing his early forties.

"Honest, Mr. Jones. I would've noticed. I came here all alone, just like you told me."

"That's good, Schildekeit. Just follow orders and you'll be okay."

The one who was with Jones was Ratso's old buddy, Tommy Schildekeit—"Schildy," they called him. That was

what had brought Ratso here. As long as he had to be a rat, he'd figured he could sneak around and check out something Schildy had told him. Something Marlene had mentioned as well, that she'd heard at her college, about somebody new in town who was pushing drugs to the kids in high school.

That was where Ratso drew the line. Some of the kids, Marlene had told him, were younger than high school and, while it was one thing to peddle something that you knew someone else wanted already, this was to kids who didn't know better. He wished he could talk to Marlene more about that, except that she'd dropped him. She'd gotten fed up with him breaking dates just because he'd thought he'd felt funny—that was before he'd figured out it was *only* on nights when the moon was full that he was going to turn into a rodent—and this night, when she'd insisted he take her to a big basketball game at her college, had been the last straw. They'd had an argument that afternoon and she'd finally told him that, from then on, she'd just plan on going places alone.

"What was that, Schildekeit?"

Ratso had eased himself through the window. He dropped to the floor and shrank quickly into a shadowy corner.

"Just a rat, Mr. Jones. Honest—I told you—I ain't been followed." Schildy reached underneath his jacket and brought out a package. "I brought the money."

"Not so loud, Schildekeit. Just put it into the briefcase here." Ratso had already seen that the older man carried a briefcase, and that he wore a suit and tie. That meant this Jones had big crime connections, likely as not, and that his friend was in over his head. "You know where to pick up the new stuff?"

"Yeah, Mr. Jones, I..."

Ratso had already started to creep toward the half-closed door. He'd learned what he'd come for. And, while he didn't relish the idea—he fought back a sudden urge to chuckle, or do whatever rats did instead—of "ratting" on friends, he figured that after he'd tipped the cops and they picked up Schildy, if his friend turned state's evidence Schildy'd be okay. He had to nail Jones, though, one way or the other. Except, when he'd almost made his escape, the door screeched open.

Ratso felt a foot connect with his side and, rolling with it, he scrambled back into the corner he'd just left. He shrank into the shadows, squinting his eyes as he peered again into the room's dim light. The man who'd come in, dragging something that Ratso couldn't quite make out behind him, was big and beefy.

"Geeze, Mr. Jones," the new man grunted. "Just what kinda place you got here anyway? Crawling with vermin."

Ratso resented that—more, he resented the bulge he could see in the man's too-tight suit coat. The man carried heat. Big crime was behind what this Jones guy was doing.

"What you got there, Bull?" Jones asked. Yeah, Ratso thought, the name sure figured.

"Somebody snooping around, Mr. Jones."

The big man pulled on the object behind him—somebody's wrist, Ratso could see now. A girl flew into the room past the big man and landed on the floor with a thud.

Ratso froze. The girl was Marlene.

"You know her, Schildekeit?" Jones' voice was low, more so than before, and had taken on a menacing taunt.

"Honest, Mr. Jones...."

"Never mind, Schildekeit. I can see she's too classy for you or the guys you hang out with." Ratso resented that comment too, but, physical courage never having been his strong suit—he'd rationalized a long time ago that that was probably because of his shortness—he remained in his corner while Jones leaned over to stare at Marlene. "Now," Jones continued, "what brings you here, girly?"

"I—I was just looking for my boyfriend," Marlene stammered. Ratso could see that her face was bruised—that this Bull person had roughed her up before he'd brought her into the warehouse. He bared his teeth, but just shrank back farther.

"He usually take you on dates by the river?"

"I—we had a fight. I was just going home by myself when I thought I saw his car by the river. Then I saw the light in this building!"—Marlene was crying—"and I thought maybe he might be in trouble."

"I think I know who she is now, Mr. Jones," Schild broke in. "Goes with a guy I used to pal with—guy named Ratso. I seen 'em together once in a while, like—you know—from sort of a distance. Anyhow, she's just a college kid. She don't mean no harm."

"That true, girly?"

"Honest, Mr.—Mr. Jones? I was just trying to find my boyfriend and I'd already realized that he wasn't here. I was just about to leave when this man came up and...."

"She overheard what you were talking about, Mr. Jones." Bull's voice still sounded like a grunt, as if he were even less human than Ratso, except for one difference—that Bull was the way he was all the time. "You know what I think?"

"Yeah, Bull, but not here." Jones took another look at Marlene, still on the floor, then turned to the others. "Schildekeit, you help Bull find a rope, then go outside and, if this Ratso guy should show up, you let me know. Okay?"

"Yes, Mr. Jones."

Both men went out, leaving Jones and Marlene alone in the room together. A few minutes later, Bull came back and started to tie the girl's hands behind her. Ratso just watched from the corner he crouched in.

"Now," Jones said, when the big man stood up to show he was finished, "I want you to put the girl in your car. Take her on out to the 'Meadows'—one of those big open dumps they still got there. You understand what I'm getting at, Bull?"

Bull nodded and pulled Marlene up to her feet too. He only needed to use one hand. "Yeah, Mr. Jones," he said with a smile. "That way nobody'll know when I kill her."

Marlene fainted long before Bull's car reached the Meadows. As soon as Bull had left the warehouse, Ratso sneaked back out the window. He'd seen the car Bull was dragging

Marlene to and, even though—let's face it, he thought—even though he was still a coward, he'd rushed ahead. He'd waited until Bull had opened the door and turned back to Marlene, then scrambled inside. Now he was hiding underneath a pile of coats he'd found on the back seat, listening to the hum of the car's tires as it headed south.

He hadn't the slightest idea what he'd do—he just knew one thing. Marlene still loved him. She'd come to the warehouse because she'd seen his car where he'd left it, his clothes inside, and thought that maybe he'd gotten in trouble.

Now, because of him, Marlene was the one in trouble. And there was nothing that he could do—he'd even discovered that rats couldn't cry—except have the decency to be with her until her life ended.

He listened as the car's hum took on a lower tone, feeling it slow and pull off on a side road. He crouched and tensed his muscles under him, waiting until it came to a stop, then jumped as soon as the driver's door opened. All he knew was he couldn't chance being left locked inside.

"Geeze, what was that?" he heard Bull mutter. Ratso'd passed right over the big man's shoulder—he'd never realized that rats could jump that high! He landed in shadow, then scampered quickly under the car and waited while Bull crossed around behind it, gun in hand, and finally opened the passenger door.

He sniffed the night air—to a rat's nostrils it smelled like pizza—and followed Bull after he'd taken Marlene out and started to carry her farther into the junkyard. At least one thing seemed to be going for him—he didn't smell dogs, or anything else that was likely to harm him as long as he made sure to stay out of Bull's way.

He looked up briefly and saw the lights of Secaucus glowing across the river—behind them the lights of Jersey City—as Bull continued to carry Marlene through the ever-growing heaps of garbage. What he smelled, though, was no longer just pizza—it was now the smell of a whole Italian restaurant to his rat's nostrils. He had to concentrate on Marlene. On what he was doing. Following Bull and the woman he loved.

Bull had stopped and was putting her down.

"You coming awake, babe?"

Ratso could hear Bull talking to Marlene. The smell was so powerful he had trouble keeping his mind on the words—the smell wasn't just an Italian restaurant, but also a bakery and—he sniffed harder—not only that, but a delicatessen. The smell was—he heard Marlene groan something back.

"Yeah, you're coming awake," Bull was answering, his gun in his hand now. "I hear you, baby. Just a minute—before I kill you. I got a treat for you."

Ratso had to concentrate now—forget about restaurants. The least he could do was pay attention to what was happening to his woman. He saw Bull shove the gun back in his jacket, pick up a can of reeking water. He watched as the big man bent over Marlene, as if in slow motion, his other hand reaching down to his pants.

"Gonna splash water on your face, baby. No fun for either of us if you ain't awake to enjoy it."

Ratso bared his teeth—let his breath out in a high-pitched squeal. Just then Marlene twisted—hit the filthy can with her shoulder and sent it splashing back into Bull's face.

The smell was nectar!

Ratso ignored it.

He felt Marlene's pain as the big man struck her—felt her fear as Bull rose to a crouch, pulling the gun out to hit her again.

He sprang, teeth still bared, his jaws wide open.

He locked his teeth on the big man's throat and started to tear, letting his full rat instinct take over. Nectar and blood! He heard the gun fire a single time, as if the sound came from far away. Felt the weight of the big man shift and topple backward.

He continued to tear until the big man's body stopped twitching, then let himself sink to the ground, exhausted. Then he remembered that he was Ratso—Ratso the human, even in rat's form—and made his rat nostrils sniff for new blood. He smelled only Bull's—he realized that meant his girlfriend hadn't been hit by the gunshot.

He staggered to where Marlene lay, unmoving, relieved to confirm that she'd only fainted a second time. He burrowed a trench in the muddy ground underneath her back until he could reach where her wrists were tied, and he started to gnaw away at the knots.

He'd just finished cutting through the last one when he suddenly realized that the garbage was starting to smell bad. He pulled his head out—began backing away. The sun was rising, its rim just breaking the smoky horizon.

He heard Marlene groan—he backed away faster, then felt himself scrambling up to his two feet. He stood, less than ten yards away from his girlfriend, without a stitch on, with no place to hide.

"Ratso?" Marlene asked, her voice a weak whisper as she struggled to get to her own feet. He looked around wildly, searching for something—anything he could get in his hands, like—even like just a basketball, maybe—that he could hold in front of his body.

He saw his girlfriend's eyes traveling upward.

"Ratso!" she said.

He felt himself blushing—he'd never even gone swimming with Marlene because he'd known she'd laugh at his thinness. She staggered instead, though, then ran across the distance between them.

"Ratso," she said, "you saved my life. I—I don't remember too much about it"—now she had her arms around him and she was kissing him between phrases—"except that that big man was going to kill me and..."

"Marlene, I—I love you," Ratso blurted out. Now he felt as if his whole body was turning red, "Except that I..."

"I—I love you too, Ratso. I'm sorry about what I said yesterday. I mean, if you don't like basketball, I..."

Marlene released him and stood back a pace. She started to blush too.

"I—what I mean, Ratso, is—what I mean is I'm a college girl and, darn it, college girls are supposed to take things like this in stride. Do you like the movies?"

"Well, sure I do, Marlene." He looked in her face and suddenly realized that Marlene was smiling, but not in the way

she smiled when she thought that something was funny. Not funny to laugh at.

"What I mean, Ratso, is that in the movies they make these days, when a man's got a bod like yours and he's rescued the girl too—like it's not as though you're not dressed for the part."

And then it dawned on him—she really *did* love him, and not just because she thought he'd saved her. "Uh, there's a car, it belongs to the guy who was going to... uh... you know. It has a really big back seat in it and... uh... there's a couple of coats there so maybe I could put one on later to take you home. I..."

Marlene had started to kiss him again. When she finally stopped, she took his hand and led him silently in the direction he'd nodded his head in. He opened a door when they got to the car and helped her inside, then saw his reflection in a puddle that gleamed in the early morning sun's light.

He saw that his body was not thin, but wiry, and, even if still short, it looked hard as steel—that the running around he'd done in the form of a rat every full moon appeared to have done wonders for its muscles.

He climbed in beside her and, afterwards, when they drove out through the garbage together, he realized that for nearly an hour he hadn't even *noticed* the smell.

2
M
S

Future issues will include works by: Blythe Ayne, Anne Bishop, David Clayton Carrad, Michael R. Collings, Lee Dresselhaus, Robert Ford, Anne Goring, David Michael Hansen, Henry L. Lefebvre, Scott Mackay, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, William Schoell, Darrell Schweitzer, Diane Sloan, Tim Waggoner and others.

DARK WATER

by Casey Foster

Copyright © 1992 Casey Foster

Daylight was limited in the canyon, and the sunflowers that grew along the banks of the river bore silent witness to the fact, their deep yellow petals drooping dejectedly. To Sean Macintyre the canyon's gloom was peaceful serenity—a fisherman's dream. He turned his face up to peer at the strip of pale gray sky that snaked between the high canyon walls. That sky promised rain at any minute; the air was heavy with it and that fact brought a smile to Sean's face. He knew a good fishing spot when he saw one, and the rain drops would only serve to entice the fish to bite, making a good spot better.

Sean crouched on the riverbank, reaching for the Styrofoam container of worms as he looked up at his girlfriend, Rena.

"Are you sure you don't want to fish?" he asked.

Rena wrinkled her pretty nose. "Huh-uh. Really, Sean, how can you do that to a poor defenseless worm?"

Sean grinned. "He won't feel a thing in a minute."

Rena shook her head, her blonde tresses bouncing. "Yech. I could think of better ways to spend a Saturday."

Sean stood up, casting his line into the water. "It's going to be pretty boring for you just standing around."

Rena shrugged. "I'll bide my time until you're ready to picnic." She crossed her arms over her chest and wandered along the river's edge, gazing at the surrounding canyon.

Sean turned his attention to the water, letting his fishing line play out into the river's current. The water flowed rapidly in some places and pooled quietly in others. Sean knew it was in these deep pools of dark water that the fish loved to hide. He guided his line toward one of the pools, wishing Rena would let him bait a pole for her. He wanted her to have a good time, not just stand there at the water's edge looking bored out of her mind. He'd thought she'd have fun once she got to the river and caught some of Sean's own excitement. Maybe she'd change her mind when she saw him hook a fish.

Suddenly Rena's look of boredom turned to one of pure pleasure as her blue eyes widened and her mouth opened in a gasp. Sean followed her gaze to the edge of the river as she cried out and reached for the water.

"A hundred dollar bill!" Rena's voice rose excitedly above the roar of the current. "Sean!"

"Rena, be careful!" Sean called out to her. The plants growing at the river's edge looked deceptively solid, but Sean knew that if stepped on they would give way to the liquid surface of the water upon which they floated.

Too late, he watched as Rena reached into the water, burying her arm up to the elbow in the icy current and plunging simultaneously head first into the river as the plants beneath her feet shimmered and parted under her weight.

"Rena?" Sean dropped his pole and ran toward her. He knew that the water was deceptively deep, but he hadn't expected her to vanish so quickly and completely. By the time he reached the spot where she'd been standing, there was little

sign of her recent presence; just the shimmering of the plants as they floated back into place.

"Rena!" Panic etched tight lines on Sean's face as his eyes frantically skimmed the surface of the water. Mud, disturbed by Rena's fall, churned wildly beneath the surface, blocking his view. Sean strained his eyes to see, wading into the water's muddy depths. The river bottom dropped off abruptly, plunging him into the icy current up to his chest. Sean whirled his arms, trying to keep his balance as the shock of the river's temperature claimed the very marrow of his bones. The strong current nearly pulled him off his feet and he grabbed frantically at a rock, wrapping the crook of his arm around it, his eyes scanning the water—searching.

He saw no sign of Rena. The freezing water rushed around Sean, leaving him stiff and numb as though the river was running right through him. It seemed alive, trying its best to scoop him into the flow of its powerful current. He struggled back to the bank, gasping for air as his wobbly legs found solid ground, his gaze moving downstream, searching for a sign of Rena's teal blue blouse. He saw nothing.

Now the rain fell from the sky, pelting Sean, chilling his already drenched skin, no longer an ally. He searched for Rena for what seemed like an eternity before giving in to the realization that he needed help. Fast.

Leaving his fishing gear where it lay, Sean leapt behind the wheel of the jeep and, tires spitting gravel, pulled onto the dirt road and headed toward town.

Sean was sitting on his front porch, staring off into the trees when the Sheriff's car pulled up the driveway. Sean rose to his feet as Sheriff Emery climbed the porch steps.

"Mr. Macintyre?"

"Yes. Have you found her?" Sean's eyes burned from lack of sleep as he peered at Sheriff Emery. The man shifted uncomfortably.

"We've found the remains of a young woman's body about two miles downriver from where your girlfriend fell into the water."

"The remains of a body?" Sean's fingers gripped the porch railing, turning his knuckles white. "What do you mean, the remains?"

The sheriff sighed. "There's really no gentle way of putting this, Mr. Macintyre. I'm afraid that all that was found of your girlfriend's body was her head, her hands and feet, and her—uh—insides."

"Dear God." Sean sagged against the rail as the porch's wooden surface whirled beneath him. "That's impossible. Rena drowned. I saw her fall into the river with my own eyes." He shook his head, negating the sheriff's words. "Are you sure it's her?"

"Yes, sir. We've made a positive ID through her dental

records."

Sean's body shook uncontrollably. He brought his hands up to rake them through his hair, his eyes focusing wildly on Sheriff Emery's dire face. "What the fuck happened to her? You don't just fall into the water and lose half your fucking body as you're drowning!"

"According to the coroner's report, the body was dismembered with a very sharp instrument—possibly a large knife or an ax," Sheriff Emery laid a hand upon Sean's arm. "I'm terribly sorry, but you can rest assured that we'll find whoever's responsible and see to it that they're punished to the full extent of the law."

Sean nodded numbly. He sank back into the lawn chair as Sheriff Emery pulled away.

What kind of a lunatic would take the body of a poor, drowned woman—a woman who was only twenty-three, damn it—and hack it into pieces?

Sean's stomach wretched.

He barely made it to the porch railing.

Nightmares haunted Sean each time he tried to close his eyes. In his dreams, Sheriff Emery came to the front door, asking Sean to come down to the county morgue and identify Rena's remains. The hall that led through the morgue was white and sterile, the walls echoing Sean's footsteps as he made his way toward the long line of stainless steel drawers that held the remains of so many Jane and John Does.

A nightmare smile pulled at the corners of the coroner's lips as he cackled madly, jerking the drawer open and drawing back the blood-soaked sheet to reveal what had once been a beautiful blonde. Bile rose in Sean's throat as he gazed down at the cold marble slab. Rena's head lay in the middle of a pile of entrails, the skin the same color as a fish's belly, the hair clinging damply to its skull, dried clumps of moss tangled in the matted locks.

Rena's eyes, once a vivid blue, were wide open and staring—dead and unseeing—their color a washed-out neutral shade. Her hands and feet were arranged in a semicircle around the edge of the entrails, their skin a whitish icy blue. Dried blood caked the edges where they'd been neatly sliced away from her limbs and the translucent fingernails were outlined in red.

"Is it her?" The coroner cackled madly, bushy eyebrows arching. "Is it her?"

Sean looked up into the coroner's crazed smile and that was when the icy fingers closed about his wrist. His gaze shot back to the marble slab and he saw that one of Rena's hands had risen from the pile of grue to grip him in a death hold. Now the dead eyes of her waterlogged head were focused upon his face. The cracked, bloated lips parted and dark water spilled forth pouring black leeches over Rena's swollen tongue.

"Is it me?" she croaked. "Sean, is it me?"

A scream rose to Sean's lips as he tried in vain to free himself from the dead-cold hand that held him.

In his bed, he sat bolt upright, still screaming. Cold sweat poured down his back, drenching the damp sheets. Trembling, Sean threw back the covers and went to the kitchen where he

poured himself a double shot of Jack Daniel's, tipping it back in a single gulp. The whiskey burned his throat, clearing his head of the fog of sleep, leaving behind a mist of warmth.

Sean dressed and went out to the jeep. The moon hung high in the midnight sky, its silvery luminance bathing the surroundings in a light as bright as day as Sean drove to the canyon. He parked near the spot where Rena had fallen into the water. What the hell had happened to her from there? Had she drowned and fallen prey to some madman who got a thrill out of slicing up dead people, or had she been found, still alive, and then murdered? Sean followed the river, walking along the bank, imagining Rena drifting helplessly along in the strong current.

About a half mile downriver the water took a sharp turn, flowing off into a large pool cut deep into the walls of the canyon, creating a cave-like effect. Moonlight filtered into the canyon to spill upon the pool. Sean peered intently at it. Its midnight depths swirled silently, relatively calm in comparison to the flow of the river's current. Its dark water was fascinating, so deep it actually appeared to be black.

Black crystal.

Sean stepped closer to the edge, resting the palm of his hand against the canyon wall. The pool possessed an eerie beauty with the moonlight reflecting off it. He was surprised that Rena's body hadn't been pulled into the pool by the current and become snagged upon the rocks that protruded through the surface, running all the way to the bottom of the ebony depths.

He gazed wistfully down into the water, his mind whirling for the thousandth time with a string of "if only's." If only he hadn't taken Rena fishing. She didn't even like the sport. If only she'd let him bait a pole for her, then she'd have been right beside him fishing....

The glint of gold caught Sean's eye beneath the surface of the water.

He leaned forward craning his neck, straining his eyes for a better view of the object. Its shiny surface shimmered beguilingly beneath the water, reflecting moonlight. It appeared to be wedged between the rocks. Sean's mouth opened as he bent over the pool. Could it be? It was a gold nugget. The biggest damned gold nugget he'd ever seen!

Gripping the edge of the bank for support, Sean leaned out and thrust his arm into the water, reaching for the gold nugget. As his hand closed around it, an excruciating bolt of pain shot through his palm—white hot, intense. Sean barely had time to suck in his breath in a silent gasp of pain before he was jerked headlong into the water.

He plunged beneath the surface, the icy chill engulfing him, the current pulling at him. It threatened to drag him down to the black depths of the pool's bottom where it would then sweep him away down the river, perhaps to the very spot where Rena's remains had been found. But before the current had its chance, Sean felt his body being tugged in the opposite direction, moving inward toward the far recesses of the cave. He opened his eyes, fighting to be able to see through the water's dark crystal depths. His arm must be caught in some of the weeds that grew beneath the water's surface. If he could just pull free of them....

Sean tugged, and while the dull, throbbing pain remained

in his hand, something gave and he felt himself able to move away from the strong force of the pull, up toward the water's surface. Lungs near bursting, Sean thrust his head up above the water, gasping in sweet gulps of crisp night air. Then he was jerked beneath the surface once more and fresh pain shot through his palm. He dimly realized he was still clutching the gold nugget and he tried to drop it, but it wouldn't leave his grasp.

This is crazy! Sean struggled beneath the dark water, trying to remain calm and reserve what precious little breath was being held in his lungs. His eyes strained through the darkness and suddenly, directly in front of him, he saw the pointed nose of a Northern Pike. Sean blinked stupidly, staring at the fish. He knew that Northern Pikes could weigh fifty pounds or more, but this one was the size of a small shark, perhaps five feet in length from what Sean could make out.

It blinked its cold black-centered eyes at him, gills working rapidly, pumping oxygen through. Sean wished he had a set of gills, for his lungs were growing tight with the lack of air. As he stared at the fish, unable to tear his gaze away from its enormous size, the fins beneath the gills moved a bit slower, cocking back at an angle, and Sean saw what they had concealed before.

Protruding from beneath the strong, swimming fins were three very human-like fingers and a thumb, structured in such a manner that they were able to retract like the claws of a cat. The Pike turned slightly and Sean saw that it had a matching set beneath the opposite fin.

And clutched in the fuzzy outline of those fingers was a length of strong, nylon fishing line.

Sean's eyes widened as his gaze moved to his hand, to the gold nugget that wasn't a gold nugget at all. A large, brass hook protruded from the nugget, its wicked barbs sunk cruelly into the palm of Sean's hand.

Sean let his breath out in a silent scream of bubbles and fought his way madly to the surface, his lungs nearly bursting as he reached the top. The fishing line trailed from the nugget, playing out behind him as Sean sucked in lungfuls of cool mountain air before he was jerked below the surface again, and his mind madly registered the thought that he was being toyed

with, just as he'd played many a fish on the end of his pole.

The Northern Pike below him in the pool's dark water was "playing" out line, letting Sean go up to the surface, back down again, until he was tired out. Sean's mind whirled crazily. It was Rena's death. His loss of her was causing him to hallucinate.

But as Sean came back down into the water and met the cold gaze of the Pike's unblinking eyes, he remembered the hundred dollar bill. Rena had hollered something about seeing a hundred dollar bill before she'd been pulled beneath the river's icy surface. Sean recalled the way her blue eyes had widened, the way her jaw had dropped in pleasant surprise as she bent to reach for the money that wasn't money at all, but instead was some sort of macabre "fishing" lure.

Now the Northern Pike's jaws cracked open, revealing powerful, sharp teeth. Sean used up the last of his energy, flailing wildly in the icy depths of the water in attempt to escape—water that was now making his limbs numb, dulling the throb of the huge hook in the palm of his hand. His head felt light and he watched, as if from a distance, as the Pike's "fingers" brought forth a large fishing stringer.

The Pike moved closer, bumping up against Sean as the fingers reached out and hooked the stringer up through Sean's nose, threading it down his nasal passage to his throat, and back out of his mouth where it was snapped into place. Water flowed in through his open mouth and his body jerked spasmodically in a weak cough as his tired, bursting lungs made a final attempt to rid themselves of the water that flowed down to drown the air from them.

The last thing Sean saw before blackness claimed him was the silvery, glinting blade of the razor sharp filleting knife.

2
AM
S

2AM READER POLL:

We'd like to know your favorite stories in this issue. Please list below your 3 top favorites; to be received no later than February 15, 1993. Results will be listed in the next issue of 2AM.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

No need to cut this page. Just write your list on a postcard and mail to Gretta M. Anderson, c/o READER POLL, 2AM Magazine, Box 6754, Rockford, IL 61125-1754.



Messages

by T. A. Hennard
Copyright © 1992 T. A. Hennard

There was an almost imperceptible click as the numbers on the clock radio changed from 6:29 to 6:30. It boomed to life.

"And you don't feel the steel 'til it's hanging out your back!"

Bill snaked a hand out of the covers and slapped at the clock radio on the bedside table. It defied him and continued to pour high volume rock 'n' roll into his wakening ears. He peeked out, took careful aim and slapped again. He rolled over in the bed and groaned. AC/DC would wake you up, but it was not necessarily pleasant.

He flipped the covers back and sat on the edge of the bed. He blinked once, twice and opened his eyes for good. He was greeted by a stolid gray light that strained through the drapes and covered the bedroom like a membrane, bleeding color from everything it touched. Bill picked up the remote control and used it to turn the bedroom television on. A white-washed woman in a blue dress was telling him what the world was like outside his door. He idly wondered how she could smile like that when he was so tired. He could not remember ever being this tired.

He set the remote control back down on the bedside table and noticed the red message light on his answering machine was blinking. It was not blinking when he went to bed. He scratched his neck languidly and punched the message button. The tape rolled back and the heads clicked in.

"Hello, Bill. This is an old friend of yours. Dick. You remember me. Or maybe you don't. It's ok. I'll jog your memory."

"I was a bad boy last night, Bill. A really bad boy. Turn on the TV. She was sweet, Bill. But she bled a lot. An awful goddamn lot. Messy. Really messy. Her name was Wendy. You're gonna need that when you call the police. And she had a butterfly tattoo. On her right shoulder. They'll like that. They really will. I'll be talking to you soon."

Click. The tape started to rewind. Bill turned to the television set and ran a hand through his sleep-rumpled hair.

"It's gotta be a joke. Somebody's playing a sick joke."

The last part of a dog food commercial ran and the white-washed lady came back on the screen.

"And in local news, a brutal slaying last night. A young woman was murdered last night behind *The Go-Go*, a dance place on the east side Strip. Young Wendy Miles, a dancer in *The Go-Go*, was attacked by a knife-wielding maniac immediately after leaving the establishment by the back door. Her body was found behind a dumpster after the police were notified by an anonymous phone tip. Police sources indicate that she was found within a half hour of her death but they declined to give any more information."

Bill fumbled for the remote control and switched the television off. He sat on the edge of the bed with the remote dangling from his numb fingers. He breathed heavily, like he

had just run a long race. He felt goose pimples break out along his arms. The gentle morning urging of his bladder suddenly became a raging need to relieve himself. He stumbled toward the bathroom. He was trembling too much to even stand up.

"Look, mister, I can't help you."

The man stated it flatly. There was to be no appeal. Bill looked up at him in disbelief. At six-foot four, the detective towered over Bill, but in some ways they were alike. Both had disruly black hair that they continually combed and coaxed, to no avail. It always stuck up somewhere. They also had the pale complexion of office workers or people who worked at night, as though they had not seen the sun in weeks. But whereas the detective's face was angular and chiseled, Bill's was soft. He looked as though he was going to pasture a little too soon. The hardness of his high school days was gone, but there was still muscle underneath. It was just covered in a layer of comfortable living.

"But Mr. Statten..." Bill began.

"Lieutenant Statten," the detective growled.

"Lieutenant Statten, I'm sorry. Lieutenant Statten, I've got the man's voice on tape. He called me this morning. He said her name was Wendy and that she had a butterfly tattoo on her right shoulder. He said that you, the police, would like that."

Statten sighed once more and looked at the ceiling. A single fly stroled across the smoke-stained acoustical tile like a lone traveler on the face of the moon.

Why do I always get the crazies? Statten thought to himself.

He looked back down at Bill and his voice was even, but he could not hide the undercurrent of impatient anger.

"I told you before, Mr. Gaines. I'm not going to tell you again. They announced her name on the news." Bill started to say something but Statten held up a warning finger and he stopped. "As for the tattoo, she was a *dancer*, for Christ's sake. A stripper. Any one of five thousand guys would know about that. Strippers don't keep their shoulder blades covered, that's for damn sure."

"Now you just run along. What'd you say you were? A loan officer or something? I'll have to remember to look you up when I need a new car. I've had a great time talking with you but I've got twenty-five more crazy fuckers waiting in the hall just aching to say they know about it, or they did it, or they got a message from God or something. It's enough to drive me crazy."

"But..."

"Get out!"

Bill turned to walk out. He had a lot of practice in obeying; it came naturally to him. But at the door he paused for a moment. He reached into the pocket of his sports coat and fished out the cassette that had been in his answering machine. He tossed it onto the desk.

"That's the tape," he said. "Do what you want with it. I can't stand to have it around anymore."

He walked out and closed the door gently behind himself. Statten shrugged and dropped the tape into his top desk drawer where it came to rest atop a jumbled pile of paper clips, rubber bands, and tooth-marked pencils.

The afternoon sun assaulted Bill with blinding violence as he left the relative darkness of the precinct building. That bastard of a detective had kept him waiting all morning.

He walked briskly down the street clenching and unclenching his fists. The detective had not believed him! It was impossible. How could he not believe? He felt the rage build within him. The man had called him crazy.

"Control, control, control," he whispered under his breath.

The familiar catechism was not working. He stopped in the center of the sidewalk.

"JESUS CHRIST!"

He screamed it at the top of his voice until he felt his vocal cords were grinding in his throat. People around him stared. He glared back at an old man and the man quickly looked away and continued walking. Bill continued to walk. He felt better already. Sometimes it was better, healthier to just get your feelings out in the open. He had already called Mr. Perkins at the bank and told him that he was not going to be in today. No place to go but home. Maybe take a nap. A little rest might renew his outlook on things. Perspective. He needed perspective.

Bill opened his eyes and stared at the varnished wood floor. He was lying on his stomach on the couch with his left arm dangling off. It tingled a little as he sat up. He swept the room with his eyes and found the old pendulum clock. 5:47. He smiled. It had been a good nap. He leaned back into the couch and sat for a moment, relishing the stillness of the late afternoon.

That was something that Bill's apartment had plenty of: stillness. He lived on the bottom floor of an ancient three-story apartment building, a hold-over from an age long past. The walls were all solid brick and it had a polished wooden floor and high windows covered with wrought iron grating. There was even a dumbwaiter set in the far wall of the living room. It ran down to the basement, a reminder of a time before electric heating. In the old days, there were coal-fired stoves in the living rooms and kitchens of the building and a coal bin in the basement. You just filled the dumbwaiter and hauled it up, the apex of luxury for the time. Bill had pushed an antique bureau in front of it. He had a few office friends with children and it was better not to take any chances.

He finally roused himself enough to stand. It was time to cook dinner. He walked over to the stereo and dropped a Wynton Marsalis CD into the tray. He pushed the button and the tray slid shut. In seconds, a bluesy version of "Hickory Dickory Dock" filled the room. He went to his bedroom and saw that the light on the answering machine was blinking.

"Oh God." The room swallowed his voice.

He stood for a moment in the center of the bedroom, staring at the answering machine. It was just an ivory-colored plastic

box, a tape, some buttons, a speaker and a little circuitry. That's it. Nothing more. Nothing to fear for damned sure. But he feared it anyway. He feared it the way he instinctively feared that darkness in the back of closets where anyone, or anything could be hiding. To get him.

He approached the machine tentatively and pushed the message button. The tape whirled back, further than this morning.

Click.

"Hello, Bill? It's Mary from the office. I saw you weren't in today and Mr. Perkins said you called in sick. I hope you get to feeling better. Call me if you need anything. Bye."

Bill's legs melted from beneath him like hot butter. He sat back heavily on the bed. It was just Mary. Then another voice, one he recognized.

"Hello, Bill. It's me again. The police didn't believe you? Too bad. Thought that I gave you enough info. How could I know the little cunt's name would be on TV so fast? I'm not a cop, am I? Sorry to embarrass you. Don't worry about that now. Tomorrow you'll have plenty of info. They'll believe you. Trust me."

Click.

Bill looked down and saw that his hands were shaking. He picked up the telephone and was halfway through the number when he slammed it down again. Nobody believed him before. Why should now be any different? He punched the save button on the answering machine. He could do nothing about it now. Maybe he could tomorrow. He sat for a while staring at the machine, willing it to do something, anything. Finally he tore his gaze from it and leaped up from the bed.

He ran into the kitchen and opened the utility drawer. He rummaged through it for a moment, pulled out a hammer and ran back into the bedroom. He stood over the machine with the hammer held above his head. He wanted to smash it. He wanted to hear the crunch as the steel tore through the ivory-colored plastic. He longed to see little blue sparks fly from the broken circuitry and have the ozone smell of raw electricity waft through the air.

But could he? It might be the only link to the killer. Bill knew that it was the killer that left those messages. He could practically hear the blood dripping from the voice. He wanted to smash it, break the chain, but could he? Should he? What would happen if that maniac called in the morning and nothing picked up the phone. He had Bill's number. That meant he had Bill's address. The thought sobered him quickly. He brought the hammer down to his side and let it slip from his fingers to the floor. It hit with a muffled thud against the rug that covered the wooden floor. Bill sat on the bed with the hammer between his feet and laid his face in his hands.

He wept.

Bill put off going to bed as long as he could but finally, with his eyelids drooping, he clicked the television off and went into the bedroom. The light on the answering machine was steady, a small red eye in the darkness. He pulled the covers up and slipped beneath them. He lay staring into the darkness, knowing that sleep would not come.

He fell headlong into a dreamless sleep.

At 6:30 the radio went off like a time bomb; Guns 'n' Roses was welcoming him to the jungle at about a billion decibels. He slapped hard at the clock-radio and got it the first try. Silence. He grabbed hold of the edges of consciousness and pulled himself reluctantly into the waking world. He rubbed his face. He was tired. As the grogginess of sleep fell away he knew that he must do something, but he could not remember what it was. He sat up in the bed and leaned back against the cool wood of the headboard.

"The machine." He whispered it as though afraid that saying it aloud would cause it to be true.

He cut his eyes to the answering machine. The light was blinking.

"Hello again, Bill. It's your buddy. I was a bad boy again last night. Even worse than the night before. Enough of that. I'll skip to the news. I'm glad you don't have one of those thirty-second machines. This is going to be a long story.

"This one's name was Jamie. Jamie Wells. I found her behind *The G*. She's a dancer. A pretty thing. Maybe I should say she was a dancer. Those days are over.

"She was wearing a red blouse and black slacks. Her hair was tied back with a red ribbon. Cute, huh? I grabbed her from behind. Pulled her behind a dumpster. Just like Wendy. I sat on top of her and held her arms down with my legs. Made her promise not to scream. Told her if she screamed I'd cut an eye out. She believed me. Maybe it was the knife. Always gets their attention.

"I made her tell me all about herself. She's from Bent Springs, North Dakota. Father owns a grocery store. Mother is a legal secretary. She has two sisters, both younger than she is... was. She was twenty-two years old. Had been to a junior college outside of Bent Springs for two years before she moved here. She has a dog named Monroe at home, a schnauzer. That's it. She was surprised that I really wanted to know.

"That's when I jabbed her with the knife. Not much, just a little prick. Real quick and sudden. She screamed. I told her not to scream. Told her what I'd do if she did. What could I do? I held her mouth shut. Cut out her left eye. She squirmed but I held her. You'd have been proud.

"I waited for her to calm down a little. Told her she had two choices. Told her she could tell me which one she wanted. Number one; die quick. Fast and painless. Number two; die slow. First cut out her other eye. Then her tongue. Then maybe a breast or a finger. The usual. Told her I'd let go of her mouth. She could tell me which one. But if she screamed... I asked her if she understood. She nodded.

"I let go of her mouth. All she could do was whimper. I'm impatient. Told her I could make the choice for her. She quieted right down. I asked her if she'd made her choice. She nodded. I asked her what it was. She said 'Quick.' I could barely hear it. 'So you want to die quick?' I asked. She nodded. Closed her good eye with my hand. Rammed the knife into the other empty socket. There was a lot of blood. But she only twitched once. I always keep my promises.

"Goodbye, Bill."

Click.

Bill felt a cold, greasy wave of nausea spill over him. The man was so cold, so impersonal, so... professional. A startlingly realistic and detailed vision of the knife sticking out of the dead girl's face suddenly seized his mind in an icy grip.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God," he mumbled between fingers and clenched teeth as he ran for the bathroom. He barely made it in time.

Five minutes later he was dialing Lt. Statten's number as cold sweat dripped from his forehead onto the phone. He had to try three times before his shaking fingers got it right.

"Christ on crutches!" Statten yelled as he slammed the phone back into the cradle.

Everyone in the office looked at him.

"The crazy fucker ain't crazy. He described it to a tee and he's bringing us the tapes." Statten laughed and saw that everyone was staring at him. "What're you looking at?" he yelled.

It only took the technicians a half hour to set up the telephone monitoring equipment in Bill's bedroom. Now all they had to do was sit and wait. They were counting on the phone to ring. And everyone knew that when it did there would be one less dancer in the world.

They tried not to think about that.

"What do you mean you're leaving? It's awful goddamn quick notice, Statten," Bill said irritably.

The thought of them leaving him alone with the killer still out there scared him. Statten looked at him for a moment before speaking. He had come to like Bill and hated leaving him alone.

"That's just it. We have to leave. We've been here almost two weeks and nothing's happened. The Captain says that was probably just a fluke, some fucked-up weirdo drifted through town and picked you out of a phone book."

"Do you believe that?"

Statten started to speak but Bill interrupted.

"I mean *really* believe it."

"No. No, I don't. But I don't have any choice either, Bill. Unless you can ID the voice..."

"We've been all through that. You know I can't. I've never heard it before."

"Yeah, I know. The funny thing is that it sounds almost familiar to me. Almost." His voice was wistful. "We've got to leave. We just do. But we'll leave the monitoring equipment here for a while anyway, just in case. We don't need it for another job right away."

"Thanks." Bill's voice was sarcastic.

"It's the best I can do, Bill. I'm sorry." He turned to leave and then turned around again. "You've got my card. Be sure and call me if anything happens, if I can help. I'm sorry, Bill. This is just the way things work."

He turned and walked through the door. The house was empty.

Four days later Bill fell into his bed, looking forward to a

good night's sleep. The police technicians had come and removed the monitoring equipment from his bedroom. They said they needed it for another case. It was nice to not have the persistent humming that the stuff produced. It was the sound that a mosquito would make if it were about ten times bigger. It was always bothersome. He had slept restlessly the whole time it was there.

The next morning Bill rolled over and looked at the answering machine first thing. It had become habit. It was blinking.

"Oh God, please no."

He steeled himself and punched the message button even though he knew what it would be.

Whirr. Click.

"Hello, Bill. Your old buddy again. Missed me?"

"Jesus Christ," Statten said when he hung up the phone.

He felt limp. He felt like a plastic cup that had been thrown on an open fire, wilted, blackened, withered.

Nothing had happened on the case for three weeks, not a peep. And now there was another dead girl. Another message and another dancer behind another club. Where would it end?

"Christ."

He picked up the marble paperweight he had bought at a gift shop in the Rockies and began mindlessly to turn it over and over in his hands.

There was something that he was missing, something right on the edge of his vision, something vital. If he could just see it. It was like driving a car at night in a fog. You could not see the things beside the highway. But you could see shapes that sort of suggested the things that stood beside the highway. If you could decipher the odd shapes, then you would know what was beside the highway. The shape hung above and beside the range of his mental vision like the perfect phrase that you can never think of in time for it to be witty. He turned the paperweight over and over. Faster. An answering machine. It was a fucking odd way to leave your mark. An answering machine. Why? Why? Answering machine. Voices. That's what answering machines record. Voices. It's always voices. Any truth that an answering machine provides must be from a voice. A voice. He closed his eyes and listened in his mind to the voices on the tapes. He had listened to them a hundred times. Voices. Voices. Voices.

Goddamn it, that's it! That's awful goddamn it!

He slammed the paperweight into his desk top so hard that it cut his hand. A trickle of blood dripped onto a report he had been filling out. He did not notice. He picked up the phone.

"Lab? ... Yeah, Mike, this is Statten. Yeah, thanks. Listen, I need a favor and I need it quick. You still got those tapes from the answering machine case? All of them? Good. I need voice prints on every speaker on those tapes. I know it's a pain, but I need every speaker. Thanks."

He put the phone down and noticed that his hand stuck to the handpiece a little. He pulled it loose. It was only then that he saw that he had cut himself. No matter. No matter at all.

Statten sat in the front passenger seat of a dark blue, four-

door Chrysler parked in the street in front of Bill's apartment. He sipped coffee and stared at the front door of Bill's house. He had been there for the last three hours and his butt was starting to ache a little. He tried not to think about it. He had come too far to give up on this one.

He sat in silence, rejecting every discrete offer of conversation his partner tried to make. He sat there castigating himself. He should have seen it sooner. All the clues were right in front of him. Why was it Bill that the killer called? Why didn't Bill wake up when the calls came in, especially since the phone was next to the bed? Why did it suddenly stop when the police came? Statten knew he had slipped up and he also knew that he had cost one more girl her life by not catching it before he did. But he could not think about that now. The voiceprints matched. They sounded different as night and day but they matched on the computer and the computer did not lie. In the words of Bill and Dick, or maybe more properly *William Richard Gaines*, computers never "awful goddamn"-well lied. It was there all the time, just waiting for him. Now it was just a matter of catching him in the act, getting enough evidence to take it to court and make it stick. The D.A. wanted to take him down with what they had, but Statten wanted to be sure and it was his call.

Bill fell asleep almost as soon as he pulled the covers over himself. He thought that he never dreamed, but anyone who spent the night with him would heartily disagree. The dreams started within minutes of his falling asleep and lasted until dawn, if something else did not happen to stop them.

A nine year old Bill walked through the front door of his house and saw his mother and father both standing there, waiting for him. His first urge was to bolt and run, but he stood his ground. He gently closed the door behind him. His parents advanced until they towered on either side of him.

"I just got off the phone with Mrs. Duncan," his mother said.

"She told us that you and George had a fight," his father added.

"No. She said that you beat up on George. She said that you picked on him at recess until he threw a rock at you and then you made him meet you after school."

"And then you beat him up."

"You know we can't let you do this, Bill."

"One can't go through life letting one's aggressions run wild, Bill."

"You just can't do it."

"It'll only bring you to grief."

"You know we only say this because we love you."

"If we didn't love you we wouldn't have to do this."

Bill's father unbuckled his belt and pulled it off. He did it in one quick motion and it made a sound like a snake might make as it uncoiled to strike.

"Drop your pants, son," his father commanded.

Bill hesitated and looked imploringly at his mother but her face was stern. He dropped his pants and stood there between them, trying not to cry.

"Your underpants too," his father said.

Bill looked up at his mother. She nodded her head yes. She wore the look of a martyr, a look that said, "I only cause myself this pain because I love you." Bill dropped his underpants and turned to face his mother. He grabbed her skirts and she grabbed his thin shoulders. He stole himself.

"Remember, son, this is just the pain that you inflicted on George coming back to you," his father announced.

"It's for your own good," his mother said.

Crack. Bill stiffened under the belt and his mother grabbed his shoulders tightly. Crack. Crack. Crack. Tears started running down his face in twin streams. Crack. Crack. He bit his lip to keep from crying out. Crack. Crack. He could not help it anymore; he started crying. Crack. Crack. Crack. The belt continued to fall.

Finally it was over. Bill stood there, leaning against his mother, sobbing freely. When he was sure that there were no more lashes coming, he stood up by himself and snaked a hand down to his bottom. He brought his hand up and looked at it. The tips of his first three fingers were red with blood. He looked up at his mother and she looked away.

"You know where to go now, son," his father said.

Bill picked his pants and underwear up and shuffled off upstairs, sniffing. He walked up the first flight, wincing with each step. He went to the broom closet at the top of the stairs and opened the door. He went inside and closed it behind him. He heard his father's heavy footsteps on the stairs and then the harsh metallic click of the tumblers turning in the lock. All was darkness and silence except for the sound of his own gentle sobs.

Hours passed. Bill did not have a watch and he could not have seen it in the darkness of the locked broom closet anyway but he knew that it was hours because he had finally been able to sit down and he had peed in the jar twice. When he sat, he had to put the jar between his legs with his knees on one wall and his back on the other because the closet was so small. It had also been a long time since he had stopped crying but he could remember it clearly.

Bill started mumbling to himself as he sat in the close darkness.

"I won't do it anymore I promise I won't do it anymore I promise I won't do it anymore I didn't mean to do it really I didn't something just happened and I got mad and he was there and it just happened I won't do it anymore I promise."

His voice suddenly changed, grew deeper and more raspy. "You stupid! You dodo-bird! You shit! You pussy! Don't say that. George deserved it. He threw a rock at you. Everybody laughed. You had to do it."

The voice changed back.

"But Mom and Dad, they say it's wrong to hit..."

"You stupid! They say it's wrong. They hit. They're bullies."

"But it's Mom and Dad. I can't."

"You can. Don't give up. Get outta here. Tell your teacher. Do something."

There was a knock on the door.

"Are you ready to come out, honey?" It was his mother's

voice.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Will you be good and promise not to do this again?"

Bill growled to himself.

"Don't do it. She's a bitch. Look what she's done. Feel your bottom."

"Shut up. Just shut up," he hissed desperately.

"What did you say, Billy?"

"Nothing."

"Will you promise?"

He hesitated a moment while he fought the voice down.

"Yes, ma'am."

He heard the key turn in the lock and the door opened. The light stung his eyes.

"Then come on out, honey, you're forgiven. Your dinner's waiting for you downstairs in the oven."

Bill tossed and turned on the bed, coiling his covers around himself

"No no no no no no," he moaned weakly.

He stopped writhing and sat up in the bed. His eyes flicked open.

"Yes," he said. The voice was deep and throaty, like a coarse rasp on hardwood.

He climbed out of bed and went to the closet where he pulled a sports bag out from the darkness of the back. He took out a pair of short-sleeved black coveralls and put them on. Then he took out a pair of boots and put them on as well. He took out a roll of grey duct tape and put it in his right pocket. Finally he pulled out a knife. He unfolded the blade and smiled faintly as the diffuse moonlight struck it. Then he folded it up again and stuck it in the other pocket.

He went into the living room and moved the bureau away from the dumbwaiter. He grabbed the rope, climbed in and lowered himself into the basement. He got out and slipped a little on an old piece of coal, a remnant of yesteryear. He stood still for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. The only light in the basement came from a window that he had cracked open just enough to see it outlined against the darkness of the room. He did not worry about burglars. The basement door had been sealed up decades ago. The only way up or down was the dumbwaiter shaft and nobody but him knew anything about that, nobody but him and Bill.

After a couple of minutes, he walked over to the window, climbed up onto an old chair he had positioned there and climbed out the window into the lesser darkness of the city night. He emerged from behind some garbage cans. Then he stuck his hands in his pockets and walked whistling around the edge of the building. As he went into the alley he caught a glimpse of a brown sedan out of the corner of his eye. He never missed a step.

"You're watching, Statten?" the husky voice said. "That's ok. Bill's naive. Not me. Let's play follow the leader."

He walked down the alley toward the east side blocks known locally as the Strip.

"Lt. Statten? Come in, Lieutenant." The voice cracking

out of the radio caught Statten by surprise.

He picked up the mike.

"What is it?"

"Someone just entered the alley behind the building, sir."

"Where's he going?"

"Down the alley. Away from us. I don't think he saw us."

"He didn't come out of the house?"

"No, sir. He just appeared."

Just appeared. Out of nowhere. Statten jumped out of the car and slammed the door.

"What the hell...?" his partner started to ask.

"Got a bad feeling. Stay in the car. If you hear anything or I'm not back in three minutes, come in force."

"Yes, sir."

Statten ran across the road and up to the house. He broke out a set of picks that he kept in his jacket pocket and started to work on the lock. In about a minute, the door swung open. He turned and waved to his partner in the car and ducked into the house.

The first thing he noticed was the moved bureau and an open bedroom door. A quick inspection showed that the bed was empty. He looked into the sports bag lying in front of the closet. There were three knives lying inside. He ran into the living room, looked behind the bureau and saw the dumbwaiter shaft.

"Oh, shit."

He pulled the dumbwaiter car up as fast as he could and climbed inside, being careful to hold onto the rope. He lowered himself into the basement and pulled out his revolver before stepping out of the dumbwaiter car. He saw the open window immediately. It was like a beacon in the total darkness of the cellar.

Statten walked gingerly through the darkness toward the window, found the chair and started to climb out. When he got free of the window, he saw that he was behind some garbage cans and the alley was to his left. He ran into it and waved to the second car. Then he thumbed the button on his radio.

"Jimmy, get your ass back in the alley and bring the car. The sonofabitch slipped us. That was him in the alley a while ago."

The second car pulled up to him and stopped. Statten leaned into the open window.

"Go after that man you saw and call for back-up. Do you have a description?" They nodded. "Good. Get on the radio and get every man you can out here and searching for him. I'm going to the Strip. That's where he's headed. Search everything between here and there. Got it?"

They nodded.

"Then get the fuck after it."

They spun off and Statten's own car pulled in behind them. He got in.

"To the Strip, Jimmy. The bastard's waiting for us. I know he is."

Dick heard the first car start down the alley and watched with a flicker of a smile as the spotlight played off of the wall behind him. Dick knew that he was safe behind the pile of bricks

he had found when he heard the car start up. Only when the car with the spotlight had passed and he heard the second of the two police cars roar off into the night did he come out of his little haven. He looked down the alley both ways and then started toward the Strip again. It was only about six blocks away, not much of a walk at all.

When Dick saw the little parking lot, he knew it was perfect. It was a vacant lot right behind a little club called *Belles*. There were a dozen cars parked on the hard-packed, oil-stained dirt and only one flickering orange street light that cast more shadows than it did light. The little parking lot was set in a cul-de-sac between three old buildings, all vacant. The east side Strip had a veneer of glitz, glamour and girls, but behind it were old tenements, trash-strewn lots and rot.

Dick walked to the lot, being sure to keep to the shadows. He crept behind the first car in the lot, the one closest to the club. It was a Cadillac Seville.

"Getting better by the second," he whispered to himself.

He slid beneath the Cadillac and positioned himself so that he had a good view of the club's rear entrance. Then he settled down to wait.

The back door swung open and Dick came instantly alert. Two people came out. The first was a huge guy in a dark shirt, maybe blue or black. It was hard to tell under the orange glow of the sodium lamps. The second was a tall, dark-haired woman with a striking figure. She wore a dark one-piece dress and walked toward the parking lot a little in front of the man. They stopped about six feet from the Cadillac under which Dick was hiding. He could tell by their legs that they were facing each other.

"Go on back, Randy. I'll be ok."

"You sure, Dawn? Boss said to walk you to your car."

"It's just right there. I'll be all right. Go on back. You've got a lot of work to do."

Neither spoke for a moment.

"Ok, Dawn."

He turned and started to walk away and Dawn walked behind the Cadillac, going down the row of cars. Dick followed her feet as long as he could but lost sight of them as she went past the car parked next to the Caddie. He slid out from under the Caddie as noiselessly as possible and came up in a crouch beside it. He looked through the back seat windows of the car next to it and saw Dawn turn into the row of cars just three cars down from him. He heard the jingle of keys. Dick turned and looked toward the club. The big man was standing on the steps waving his arm.

"It's ok, Randy!" he heard the girl call from behind him.

Dick watched as the man went inside the club and the door swung shut behind him. He turned around again and saw the woman, bending over, working her key in to the door lock. Dick started to move.

With the well-oiled motions of a predator cat, Dick skirted the rear of the car he was hiding behind and moved noiselessly into position at the rear bumper of the car next to Dawn's. He crouched there, peeked around the side of the car and watched

as Dawn turned the key in the door lock of her Escort. He heard the tumblers roll. She lifted the door handle and stepped back a little. She opened the door wide. She lifted her right foot and started to get into the car. Her back was completely to him. It was time.

Dick sprang up from his crouch and leaped at her. In one smooth movement, he covered her mouth with his right hand and grabbed her around the chest with his left. Then he wrenched her backwards as hard as he could. He saw the surprise look in her eyes even as he slammed her into the ground. He heard the small huffing sound she made as she hit the earth and the breath came out of her in a rush. Perfect. She would not be able to breathe, much less scream. He spun around and sat on top of her, pinning her arms with his legs. He reached into his right front pocket and pulled out the roll of grey duct tape, pulled about six inches out and tore it off. He let the roll fall to the ground next to Dawn's head.

Dick held the piece of tape, stretched taut between his hands, directly over Dawn's gaping mouth. He looked directly into her eyes and felt a workman-like pride at the fear he saw there. Whatever you do, do it well.

Finally, he heard her suck in a breath.

"What..." she started to say.

Dick used his thumbs on her chin to snap her mouth shut and then firmly pressed the tape over her mouth. Her eyes widened. Then he got off of her chest and rolled her onto her stomach. He pulled her arms behind her. In less than twenty seconds she was taped from elbow to wrist. He put the tape back into his pocket. He rolled her back over and looked into her eyes once more. He saw the delicious fear that lived there.

"Perfect. Awful goddamn perfect."

He picked her up and staggered to his feet. The spot he had chosen was not far away.

Statten had heard nothing on his radio for the past hour but fifteen different squad cars reporting, "Nothing, sir," when asked what they had found. Bill Gaines had apparently dropped off the face of the earth. He and Jimmy turned into yet another alley that ran through the Strip.

"Dammit, Jimmy. I know this city has a lot of places to hide, but this is ridiculous. I met this guy. He's not this smart. Not street-smart anyway, not crafty."

Neither spoke for a moment, and then Jimmy broke the silence.

"I know you met Bill Gaines, Lieutenant, but I don't think you met this guy."

"What?"

"Well, I saw Gaines too and I don't think he could stand to go out at night, especially not down alleys. This just isn't Bill Gaines."

"None of your fucking psychology, Jimmy. Spill it."

"Well, sir, we know he's crazy, he led us right to himself, after all, but I don't think we know how crazy he really is. There's two different voices on the tapes. I don't think that's Bill Gaines playing at being a guy named Dick. I think that really is another guy named Dick, a guy who's *not* afraid of walking down an east side alley at night, a guy *inside* of Bill

Gaines."

Statten ruminated for a moment, staring out the window. "STOP JIMMY! GODDAMMIT STOP!"

The car lurched to a halt. Jimmy looked at Statten and saw that he was staring at something outside the car. Jimmy followed Statten's eyes. He was looking at a dumpster, one of the big blue ones that were in every alley in the city. But this one was different. This one had "DICK" spelled out on the side in big letters. Made of grey duct tape.

"Shit," Jimmy whispered.

He slammed the car into park and pulled his pistol. Statten pulled his as well.

"You ready, Jimmy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ok."

They both opened their doors and stepped out with their guns leveled in front of them. The blue dumpster stood before them like a medieval keep, brooding and immovable. A single sodium lamp, rendered nearly impotent by the headlights of the car, sprouted from behind the dumpster like the sun-withered stalk of a dead flower. All around them was scattered the refuse of the city, newspapers, broken bottles, cans. A couple of old tires leaned against the side of the dumpster. Nothing moved.

Statten waved with his hand, telling Jimmy to loop around and get a better angle on the dumpster. Jimmy started walking sideways. Neither of them took their eyes off the dumpster. Statten started to walk toward the rear of the dumpster, toward the space between the dumpster and the wall. Jimmy entered the headlights of the car, looping toward the other end of the dumpster. Statten finally reached the dumpster and flattened his back against it. He held his revolver in front of him and took a deep breath. He turned and leaped into the space between the dumpster and the wall with the pistol before him, sweeping the area with the barrel, prepared to shoot anything that moved.

Nothing moved. There was nothing to move. Except for a broken bottle and a piece of moldering carpet, the space was empty.

Statten dropped his arms and the pistol fell heavily against his thigh. He let out a deep breath that he was aware he had been holding. He started to yell at Jimmy.

"Lieutenant? Lieutenant, I think you better turn around sir." It was Jimmy's voice but it sounded strange, a little higher than usual.

Statten turned around, raising his pistol.

"Hello, Statten."

It was the deep, raspy voice that Statten had heard before. The one that had come to fill his dreams and turn them into nightmares. He felt his stomach clench. It was Gaines, standing behind the car and just outside the weak circle of light cast by the street lamp. He had a girl held in front of him. They were both swathed in shadow. Statten started to walk forward.

"Stay where you are, Statten. I'll move."

Gaines stepped into the circle of orange light. Statten could see him clearly now although the light gave his skin a weird orange pallor. He held a dark-haired girl in front of him. Her mouth was closed with duct tape and her arms were obviously bound behind her. Gaines was holding her by her hair, which

he had wrapped around his left fist like a rope. In his right hand was a knife which he held across her throat. It glinted periodically in the sickly light. Statten felt his stomach turn into an acid-soaked knot. He could see the terror in her eyes even though she was thirty feet away. Gaines spoke again.

"Tell him to throw his gun away." Gaines gestured toward Jimmy with his knife hand. "I see him in the headlights. Some planning, huh?"

Statten hesitated and then he saw Gaines' right hand twitch a little. The girl stiffened in his grasp and a thin trickle of blood ran down her throat and disappeared between her breasts.

"Do it, Jimmy."

Statten heard a metallic clank as the gun hit the pavement.

"Good," Gaines said. "Now we're alone. Just the three of us."

"Let the girl go, Bill," Statten said.

"I'M NOT BILL! BILL IS WEAK!"

The girl squirmed and Gaines looked at her.

"Quit moving, bitch. I'll saw you in half. You don't want to die, do you?"

She quit moving and Gaines looked back at Statten.

"Are you Dick?" Statten asked.

"Of course," he growled. "Who else?"

"What do you want, Dick?"

Gaines stared at him for a moment.

"I want to punish him, you stupid fuck, I want you to punish him. He's weak. He's a quitter. He always gives up."

"Who, Dick?"

"BILL, GODDAMMIT!"

Gaines moved his right hand again, ever so slightly. A fresh trickle of blood coursed down the girl's neck. Statten could hear her moan through the tape gag.

"Why do you want me to punish him?"

"He's weak. He gives up too easy. He's a quitter."

"Ok. I'll punish him. Just let the girl go and I'll punish him."

Gaines spoke in a little sing-song. Melodic insanity.

"You don't understand."

"I understand, Dick. Let her go and I'll punish him."

"Don't hurt me, Statten! He's crazy!" Gaines said. The

voice had changed.

"SHUT UP YOU FUCK!" roared Dick.

"Was that you, Bill?" Statten asked.

"BILL IS GONE! PUNISH HIM! PUNISH HIM!"

Statten tightened his grip on the pistol and blinked back the sweat from his eyes. He felt like he was on a merry-go-round going faster and faster. He knew that he would fly off any second.

"I'll punish him, Dick. Just let the girl go!"

He sighted in on Gaines. If this did not work, if Gaines did not let the girl go, Statten decided he'd pull the trigger anyway. This merry-go-round was going too fucking fast.

Gaines dropped his head and stared at the ground. Statten could see his shoulders relax and drop a little.

"You don't understand," Gaines said sadly.

He raised his head and looked at Statten. Their eyes met. Gaines looked like a dejected child.

"You don't understand," he said, his voice full of despair.

With a smooth, powerful movement Gaines pulled the knife blade across the girl's throat. The smooth white skin opened up neatly behind the flashing knife and a torrent of blood, black in the light of the streetlamp, gushed out. The girl's body sagged toward the alley pavement: and Gaines made no effort to stop it. He held on to her hair as she slid convulsing down his body.

Statten pulled the trigger once, twice, three times and more until he emptied the cylinder and got nothing but a hollow metallic click when he pulled it again. Each time the gun bucked in his hands and each time he pulled it down to shoot again. Gaines' body rocked with each slug and fell toward the ground until the next shot picked it up a little, a bouncing death dance. Even as the hammer on Statten's pistol fell on an empty chamber, Gaines hit the ground with a thud, his life leaking out over the pavement to mingle with that of the girl who lay at his feet, her hair still wrapped around his left hand.

Statten felt suddenly weak. The pistol dropped from his hand and he sank to his knees on the cracked pavement. He sat down heavily and stared at Gaines and the girl, entwined in the final, most intimate of embraces. Another dancer. Another girl. Another life.

Statten looked at his pistol lying just out of reach and wished there was one more bullet in it. He would only need one more. Jimmy brushed by him, running toward the bodies. There was silence as he bent to examine them.

"Christ," Jimmy whispered. "I don't believe it."

Statten wrenched his longing gaze from the gun and looked at Jimmy. Jimmy looked back, his face a mask of horror and confusion.

"What is it, Jimmy?" Statten asked weakly, but he knew what Jimmy would say. He finally understood.

"He's smiling."

Subscribe today!

Only \$19.00 for 4 issues in the
US (\$21.00 Canada/ \$23.00 all
other)

send your sub to:
2AM MAGAZINE
Box 6754
Rockford, IL 61125-1754

2
AM



REAL TIME™

From Charles deLint, Ottawa, Ontario: Thanks for the latest issue of *2AM*. I'm constantly amazed at how you can put out such a classy package on a part-time basis, especially considering the extra workload you mentioned having taken on at your day job. The effort's certainly appreciated by this reader.

It was nice to see an interview with Ellen Datlow this time around. She's a savvy editor and a real pleasure to work with. People sometimes can forget how important a good editor can be—especially nowadays when so many of them are merely acquiring books rather than actually working on them—so it's nice to see that you haven't forgotten. You might also consider an interview with Datlow's *YEAR'S BEST* cohort, Terri Windling, as another side of the coin: also a dedicated editor in the best sense of the word, but whose expertise runs to a different aspect of the genre.

Enjoyed Dean Smith's story. It was a touch heavy-handed in the execution of its concept, but I was fascinated by its concept.

From Lee Callcutt, Charlotte, NC: William Relling Jr.'s personal homage to Harlan Ellison prompted me to share my own Ellison Encounter.

Years ago, I participated in a *UnEarth* story contest in which the contestants were to write short story openings, the best to be winnowed by the magazine's editors and forwarded to Mr. Ellison, with Harlan selecting three winners to finish, sharing co-authorship upon publication in *UnEarth*.

I submitted my three openings and waited... and waited... and then waited

some more—until I received notice of the magazine's demise—but still no word on the outcome of the contest. I went on to other things (like earning a living for a change instead of accumulating rejection slips) and pretty much forgot about the whole affair.

So imagine my surprise a year or so later when I open my mailbox to find an envelope of Harlan's returning my entries with regrets, kind words, best wishes—and of course the obligatory Ellison admonishment to please not do him in with needless correspondence.

Okay, so I know it was the same photocopied letter sent to every other contestant lucky enough to have made it as far as his desk—it's still my most treasured rejection letter. And needless to say I did not presume to bother him with a written thank-you. My point is that the man took the time to write at all, encouraging a rank amateur like myself simply by acknowledging my participation in a failed venture. For this, I offer my humble thanks.

And yes, Harlan, I do indeed understand.

Tom Lightfoote, Penn Yan NY: You are to be congratulated. Issue #19 of *2AM* was another fine effort. One surprise was William Relling Jr.'s column concerning Harlan Ellison. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I hope future installments of "Adventures in the Scream Trade" are as relevant to the horror/fantasy/science fiction field. Undoubtedly, I will be disappointed, and Mr. Relling's admirers will once again be treated to the World According to Relling.

Just as Mr. Relling was profoundly influenced by Harlan Ellison, I was simi-

larly affected by Ellen Datlow, the subject of Robert Errera's insightful interview. I was interested in the dark fantastic before reading St. Martin's *THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR: 3rd ANNUAL COLLECTION*, but that book inspired me to pick up the pen and try my hand at fantasy and horror. I'm glad you brought her to the attention of your readers. Now how about an interview with her co-editor, Terri Windling?

Keep up the good work.

Marianne Messina, Holliston, MA: The Datlow interview in #19 was great. As a writer/editor, I could relate to her comment that she (a pure, non-writing editor), can "cast a wider net." A writer has to be focussed and I've found that very quality can be a problem when making selections.

Also, she and Errera discussed what (after *Silence of the Lambs*) might be on the horizon in horror/SF. One thing I've often thought has some eerie potential is the 2nd person story. Not so much in the vein of Kristine Kathryn Rusch's piece that is "imagine that you are so-and-so," but more like "I know who you are." It could get pretty nasty and you could be judge of the other.

But I did think Rusch's piece was excellent. A lot going on in that short span. It sent you back into yourself.

"Amanda Babe" gave me a few chuckles—it reminded me of a warped Cherry 2000 and Tilton's "Undying Glamor" was fun, gutsy. Keep up the good work. Oh—great cover on #19.

Adventures in the Scream Trade

by William Relling Jr.
Copyright © 1992 William Relling Jr.

A marvelous event occurred in my life on September 28, 1991. That's the day my first child, Thomas William Relling, was born.

Quite an experience it was, yes, indeed. On that day my wife Ann and I had a son—this after we'd given up hope of having children of our own. You see, we'd been told six or seven years ago that it was unlikely she and I would ever conceive a child. That's one of the more

amazing things about Tommy. His mother and I stopped using contraceptives immediately after we were informed we probably weren't ever going to be parents, and for years what we'd been told held true. Then, in early January of 1991, we took a vacation trip to Los Cabos, at the tip of

Baja California. Four weeks after we came back home, Ann said to me one night, "I'm feeling really odd, and I think I'm pregnant, and now I'm telling you so I'm not the only one thinking about it." Turns out her hunch was correct. (I also now know why they caution you about drinking the water in Mexico.) Tommy popped out right on the date he was scheduled to, all eight pounds and twelve ounces of him. I was there for the entire delivery. Truly fantastic experience.

Now, some of you might be expecting a segue here, perhaps a description of the terrors of fatherhood I've encountered since bringing my son home from the hospital. Sorry to disappoint you, folks. So far I enjoy being a dad a whole

bunch—poo-poo diapers, three A.M. feedings, baby spit-up oozing down my shoulder, the whole schmeer. My boy is such a delight to be around that those things have been mere inconveniences. He and I've been having tremendous fun together: watching the World Series, listening to Mozart and Bob Marley and Chris Isaak, looking into each other's faces, singing "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," all those things you do with your

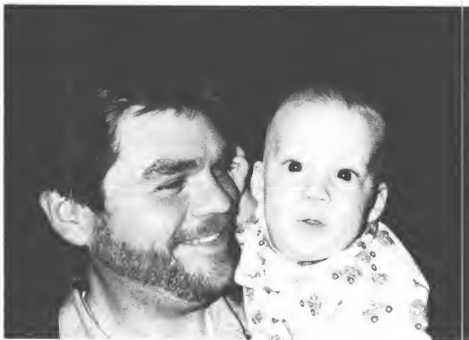
Tommy at all. It's about comic books.

Comic books?

You bet. (*How's that for a segue?*)

This morning, as I was taking a shower, I happened to be thinking about an autograph-signing party that's coming up in a couple of weeks. (It's coming up in a couple of weeks as I write this. By the time you're reading these words the party is history.) The signing is in honor of Ray Bradbury and the publication of The Brad-

bury Chronicle. Which, in case you don't own it, is an anthology of original stories celebrating Ray's fifty years as a paid, professional writer. The co-editor (with Martin H. Greenberg) and driving force behind the project was my friend William F. Nolan, who gave me one of the greatest



Bill and Tommy Relling

baby. We've even managed to catch a couple of middle-of-the-night old-time horror movies on cable—Tommy seemed to like *The Wolf Man*, but he wasn't too crazy about *Son of Frankenstein*. Terrors of new fatherhood? I haven't really had any to speak of.

So, Bill (you may be asking about now) is this what this "Scream Trade" is about? How swell your son is? Big deal. All babies are pretty swell. Yours isn't exactly special—except to you, of course. An entire column devoted to an elucidation of the joys of Tommy Relling's company don't strike the majority of us as a particularly thrilling topic.

To which I reply: Your point is taken. And, in fact, this column isn't really about

compliments I've ever received when he asked me to do a story for the book. Ray and Bill will be (were) there at the signing, along with contributors Chris Beaumont and Roberta Lannes and R.C. Matheson and Cameron Nolan. And me.

Thinking about the signing got me to thinking about the store where the party will be taking (took) place: Dangerous Visions, 13563 Ventura Boulevard, Sherman Oaks, CA. Which is owned and operated by my friends, Lydia Marano and her husband Arthur Byron Cover. Terrific store, by the way. Best SF/fantasy/horror/mystery bookstore in L.A. county.

Thinking about Dangerous Visions got me to recalling their 10th anniversary

party of some months ago. I was one of dozens of invited guests, writers and artists and fans who live in and around L.A. Among the other guests was a fella named Len Wein, whose work I've enjoyed for close to twenty years. Art Cover introduced me to Len, and the three of us had a brief but cheerful conversation, the subject of which escapes me at the moment.

Thinking about Len Wein got me to thinking about comics. Because Len (in case you don't know) is one of the top writer/editors in that field. Unquestionably, one of the top. He's been a mainstay of both Marvel and DC Comics for more than two decades. He's composed stories for every major character: Superman, Spider-Man, Batman, the Hulk, Green Lantern, you name 'em. He's the guy who invented Swamp Thing for DC and who, in 1975, was given the task of reviving Marvel's then-sagging *X-Men* series. All he did with that assignment was to create (with the aid of artist Dave Cockrum and writer Chris Claremont) what became the most popular comic of the past fifteen years. (My own affection for Len's work goes back to when I first encountered him during his too-brief tenure writing *Justice League of America* for DC.)

Thinking about comics got me to thinking about how I got into them, and what they've meant to my life. The first comic book character I met was, not surprisingly, Superman. Though it wasn't in the comics where I discovered the Man of Steel; it was the TV show starring George Reeves. The first run of the show went off the air in 1958, when I was four years old. By 1960, however, *Adventures of Superman* was into syndication, all 104 episodes, and I was old enough to dig 'em a lot.

Then, one weekday evening in the spring of 1961, I was sitting at the kitchen table doing my homework (I was in the second grade) when my mom came home from work. She'd brought me a present—an issue of *Superboy*. I'd never read a comic book before, much less owned one. That long-since-lost issue of *Superboy*—featuring a story in which the Boy of Steel travels through time to meet William Tell, the only story of three I can remember from the book—might be the most wonderful gift my mother ever gave me.

That was the start. For the next six years I was a tremendous fan and collector. Nearly all DC and only superheroes; I never much got into Marvel Comics

during the '60s, except for Iron Man. My favorite characters were Batman and Green Lantern. (They still are.) But I collected everybody from the Flash to Metal Men to Metamorpho the Element Man.

I lost interest in comics in 1967, not-so-coincidentally the year I entered high school. Too many other things to distract me, I suppose. But I got back into 'em in 1972, when I was a college sophomore. I can remember the date precisely—it was Christmas Day. I'd gone to the house of my at-the-time girlfriend to have dinner with her and her family. Among the Xmas presents she gave me that day was a stocking, and among the stuff in the stocking was the current issue of *Batman*. Which featured a pair of connected stories written by Denny O'Neil and illustrated by Dick Giordano and Irv Novick. The combined title of the stories was something like "Merry Christmas... and a Deadly New Year."

To put it succinctly, the book knocked me out. I remember thinking at the time something like: *Holy shit! This is what's going on in comics now?*

I was hooked again. I spent much of my college winter break and the subsequent months stocking up on new comics as well as ones I'd missed the past few years—again mostly DCs. (Particularly stuff either written by Denny O'Neil or drawn by Neal Adams—or, more often, by the two of them in tandem, like *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* and *Batman*. You can imagine my delight that my favorite artist and favorite writer seemed to do their best work unfolding the exploits of my favorite characters. Nirvana.)

I became a semi-serious collector in 1976, after I'd graduated from college and started working real jobs and could afford it, and then a very serious collector in 1979, after Ann and I got married and we'd moved to Los Angeles. (Including Marvels by then, because I followed Denny O'Neil, who'd changed comics companies around that time.) By 1986 I was subscribing to two comics services and visiting several local comics shops regularly. And spending about \$75 a month on the damn things. I was hooked but good.

And then... for some reason... my interest started to wane, much in the same way it had twenty years before. By the end of 1987 I was only occasionally buying comics at all. Oh, if I caught wind of something special from Art Cover or Mike Baker or one of my other comics pals...

a new Frank Miller project, Len Wein's Blue Beetle, Byrne's *Superman* series, Simonson's *Thor*, O'Neil's return to DC to take over *Batman*, *The Sandman*... I'd check it out. But my fanaticism had consumed itself. Why, I cannot say. It reached a point where, in 1989, I started running ads in various periodicals offering my entire comics collection for sale.

I'd been telling myself for the last couple of years up till then that the only reason I kept holding on to my comics was to be able to give them to my kids. By 1989, however, I'd pretty much resigned myself to never becoming a dad. The comics were taking up too much space, filling an entire closet in my office. Besides, Ann and I were about to buy a condo and we were dreading having to move seven years worth of accumulated stuff, not even counting those boxes and boxes of comic books, and since I never read 'em anymore anyway....

So I got rid of 'em. By the time we moved, in June of 1990, I'd sold or given away all but a handful I just couldn't part with. A set of O'Neil & Adams GLGA reprints. A set of Wein/Wrightson *Swamp Thing* reprints. A first edition set of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Some Roger Stern/John Byrne *Captain Americas*. A few other odds and ends.

You have no idea how glad I am now that I saved at least those. Ah fate, ah karma. Tommy Relling is here, and in a few years I'll have some very special magic to pass on to him. I'll be able to give him some comics. I'll be able to open up a universe of adventure and wonder and excitement; of cosmic battles between good and evil; of heroes and monsters and gods. And perhaps he'll learn some of the things comics taught me: about history and mythology, about right and wrong, about justice, about how stories are told.

Then again, perhaps not. Perhaps he'll just enjoy them for what they are. I can be satisfied with that.

20th

TWO SECONDS TO TWO

MASQUES COMICS DEBUTS

by Lucas O'Toole
Copyright © 1992 Lucas O'Toole

An estimated 30,000 people swung through the doors at the recent four-day Comicon Convention held in suburban Chicago over the July 4th weekend.

Hundreds of comic book dealers, artists, and publishers greeted fans. Their booths and stands were jammed tightly next to each other and spread out across every square inch of the O'Hare Airport Ramada Inn in Rosemont, displaying the latest artwork, storylines and promotions.

And amid it all, there was a neat little gem of a horror comic book making its national debut.

Adapted from the well-known horror anthology series MASQUES, edited by J.N. Williamson (also of *2AM Magazine* fame), Innovation Books of Wheeling, West Virginia, unveiled its latest product of the same name. The publishing company is describing it as "An Anthology of Elegant Evil."

"This is the best ongoing anthology in horror and now it's coming to comics," said Mort Castle, a Chicago-area horror novelist who is the editor and brain child behind the bi-monthly comic book version of MASQUES. "There's no reason to limit great stories to one medium."

The first comic book edition has some mighty fine adaptations of the original MASQUES, Castle said, all depicted in gory color by some of the best artists in the comics trade.

There is Wayne Allen Sallee's "Rail Rider" (originally published as "Third Rail"), and drawn by Mike Okamoto, a well-known airbrush artist. It's a little ditty of a piece about a train tunnel encounter

with a smiling, sneaking thing and his butcher knife.

And then there's Robert McCommon's "Nightcrawlers" (Twilight Zone, anyone?), a zinger about a Nam vet who came home with something worse than the clap, heh, heh. The story was drawn by Scott Rockwell, a veteran comic writer, sketcher and inker.

published by MacLay and Associates of Baltimore since 1984.

Among a few others, the list includes Steve Allen, Ray Eradbury, James Herbert, Stephen King, Joe R. Lansdale, Graham Masterton, Rex Miller, F. Paul Wilson, Ray Russell, McCommon, Sallee and Castle.

Castle is only one of two true specialists to make it into every edition, the other being Ray Russell.

In a more than 20-year writing career, Castle has published reams of horror short stories and two novels, *THE STRANGERS* (1984) and *CURSED BE THE CHILD* (1990), both from Leisure Books in New York.

"BUT MASQUES is very dear to me," Castle noted of the anthology.

So much so, Castle spent two years formulating the comic book adaptations and pitching them to publishers, he said.

Castle said he bounced the concept to a number of comic book publishers before a deal was struck with Innovation. He said the issue was not so much finding a publisher interested in taking on the project, but finding one who really had a genuine expertise and dedication for story adaptations from other artistic mediums.

Into the project eventually came David Campiti, a comic book adaptation specialist and Innovation's publisher and editor.

(Continued on page 54)



(l to r) David Campiti, Mort Castle, Paul Dale Anderson, Wayne Allen Sallee
Photo Gretta M. Anderson

Castle's own "Billion Monstrosities" is a disturbing tale about a cancer quack who definitely prescribed one too many coffee enemas, and Robert Weinberg's "The Crushing Death" is, well, a dark, bloody head chomper.

"Monstrosities" was inked by longtime sketcher Tim Vigil and "Death" was drawn by Mark Evans of Clive Barker's *HELL-RAISER* comic book fame.

A comic book though it may be, MASQUES obviously is no light treatment for the squeamish. The stories are true gree, faithful to the horror originals.

And only the best in the genre traditionally have made the cut for Williamson's annual book of scares,



News and views of small press publications, organizations and people by Irwin Chapman

There's a grand tradition in the specialty press of successful writers feeling the need to become successful publishers. August Derleth, founder of Arkham House, is still probably the best known writer-publisher of this century, but others such as Jack Chalker (Mirage Press), Karl Edward Wagner (Carcosa), Dean Wesley Smith (Pulphouse), Thomas Monteleone (Borderlands Press), John Maclay (Maclay & Associates), John Betancourt (Wildside Press), Richard Chizmar (*Cemetery Dance* and CD Publications), Ed Gorman (*Mystery Scene*), David B. Silva (*The Horror Show*), Paul Olson (*Horrorstruck*), Richard Sutphen (Spine-Tingling Press), and Stephen Mark Rainey (Deathrealm) have switched hats over the years and made significant impacts on their genres. Even Stephen King and L. Ron Hubbard have tested the specialty press waters with Philtrum Press's sold-out-before-publication limited editions and Bridge Publications's multi-million dollar mass marketing miracles.

Dean Wesley Smith's multi-genre Pulphouse Publishing has undergone some major changes recently (yes, folks, though I still haven't received requested review copies from Pulphouse Publishing and still can't find copies on the newsstands or bookstores in Rockford, I have received sample copies as an active SFWA member, presumably so I can nominate Pulphouse stories for Nebula Awards). Most notable is the chancy change in format of their flagship *Pulphouse: A Hardback Magazine* from a quarterly hardbound limited edition to a mass market pulp-paper monthly. The fiction in each issue is/ remains superb: novelettes, short stories, even a serialized novel. But the articles and columns are something extra special, and I especially want to compliment Smith on including Jack L. Chalker's wonderful "On Publishing and Personalities", a continuation of Chalker's history of specialty publishing which was a controversial mainstay of the late-lamented *Fantasy Review*.

In *Pulphouse* #10 (July 1992), Chalker recounts his own history as a specialty press historian, beginning with columns in Paul Allen's *Fantasy Newsletter* and continuing through publication of SCIENCE-FANTASY PUBLISHERS: A BIBLIOGRAPHIC HISTORY (Mirage Press, Ltd., Box 1689, Westminster, MD 21158, \$75.00). Chalker is not only knowledgeable, he's admittedly opinionated. And he's well worth reading.

Also in *Pulphouse* #10 (and in *Pulphouse Fiction Spotlight* #2, July 92, a companion magazine sent free to *Pulphouse* subscribers), are two marvelous short stories by O'Neil De Noux, a writer previously unknown to me (sounds like a pseudonym; but, then, I once thought Poppy Z. Brite was a pseudonym). "The Desire Streetcar" in SPOTLIGHT and "Women Are Like Streetcars" in *Pulphouse* are closer to the hardboiled-style of detective fiction popularized by Chandler and Hammett than the sf and fantasy one expects to find in *Pulphouse*, but there's something very special about this writer that I urge you to discover. *Pulphouse* subscriptions are \$39.00 for 13 issues from Pulphouse Publishing, Inc., Box 1227 Eugene, OR 97440. Inquire about price and availability of back issues.

Though John Maclay's Maclay & Associates is best known as the house that gave us J. N. Williamson's MASQUES (MASQUES I, II and IV were published by Maclay; MASQUES III was published by St. Martin's Press), Maclay has also given us Ray Russell's HAUNTED CASTLES and William F. Nolan's three-volumes-in-one hardbound LOGAN: A TRILOGY. Maclay also edited and published the award-winning NUKES anthology in trade paper.

1992 brings two new Maclay titles: ABSOLUTE POWER, a powerful new novel of contemporary witchcraft by Ray Russell; and MINDWARPS, a collection of 23 of John Maclay's own short stories that originally appeared in *Stalkers*, *Grue*, *Night Cry*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Pulphouse*, *Twilight Zone*, and other genre mags and

anthos.

ABSOLUTE POWER (ISBN 0-940776-27-8, 250 pages, published in a 500-copy limited boxed signed edition at \$49.00) pits supernatural investigator Julian Trask (the second son of the late Lord Stark) against arcane forces of evil seeking to acquire the *Artes Perditee*, the ancient book of spells, which Trask has the only complete copy locked away in a safety deposit box. Can Trask, his ex-wife, and his ex-wife's daughter (now Trask's young-enough-to-be-his-own-daughter lover) successfully match wits with a modern-day witch who ruthlessly casts deadly spells from an incomplete copy of the ancient book of evil and who wants the complete copy to gain absolute power over men and nations? Or must Trask compromise his principles and use the book himself? He who uses the *Artes Perditee* has absolute power; but absolute power also corrupts absolutely.

MINDWARPS (140 pages, hc, \$9.95) postpaid from John Maclay at Box 16253, Baltimore, MD 21210 is John's second published short story collection (OTHER ENGAGEMENTS was published by The Strange Company/Dream House in 1987). Maclay's horror is subdued, understated, and therefore all the more frightening.

Inspired by the Maclay hardbound series, Innovation Comics launched the illustrated J. N. Williamson's MASQUES at the July 4th Chicago Comicon (see Lucas O'Toole's article elsewhere in this issue). With a full-color cover painting by Boris Vallejo, Book One (Innovation Books, ISBN 1-56521-013-1, 52 pages, four-color perfect-bound, \$4.95) contains Wayne Allen Sallee's "Rail Rider" from MASQUES III, Robert R. McCammon's "Nightcrawlers" from MASQUES I (adapted by James Kisner), "A Billion Monstrosities" by Mort Castle, and "The Crushing Death" by Robert E. Weinberg. Book Two, which should be on sale by the time you read this column, contains "Popsy" by Stephen King and "Better than One" by Paul Dale Anderson. Current plans are to publish four books adapted

from the hardcover MASQUES series, then switch to original stories created specifically for the graphic medium by the best names in the horror industry. A must collectable for all true horror fans.

Also a must collectable: RAY BRADBURY CHRONICLES. These illustrated authorized adaptations of Bradbury stories are beautifully rendered by top comic artists (P. Craig Russell, Al Williamson, Bernie Krigstein, Dave Gibbons, Ralph Reese, Daniel Torres, and others; some are re-colored reprints from the old EC horror comics of the 50s). Volumes I & II are available now (Bantam Spectra trade paperbacks, ISBN 0-553-35125-7 and 0-553-35126-5, 84 pages, \$10.00); Volumes III & IV are forthcoming. If you cherish such tales as "The Golden Apples of the Sun", "Rocket Summer & The Locusts", "The Flying Machine", "I, Rocket", and "The Toynebe Convector" you'll love the illustrated versions.

Weird Tales illustrated features adaptations of stories by Harlan Ellison, Frank Belknap Long, Les Daniels, Robert Weinberg, and H. P. Lovecraft. Issue #1 (Millennium, Box 5268 Sun City, FL 33571, 36 pages, \$2.95) features Ellison's "Shattered Like A Glass Goblin" and Long's "A Visitor from Egypt". Kelly Jones illustrated the Ellison tale, P. Craig Russell illustrated Poe's "Annabel Lee", and John Bolton painted Faye Perceiz's "Party Games." A superb first issue.

Epic Comics (A Marvel subsidiary) has published a four-issue limited series of graphic adaptations entitled EPIC: AN ANTHOLOGY (ISBN 0-87135-845-X, #2 846-8, #3 847-6, 52 pages, \$4.95). Book 1 includes Clive Barker's "Hellraiser" and Lewis Shiner's and Walter Jon Williams' "Masks of the Red Death" from George R. R. Martin's shared-universe "Wildcards" series. Book 2 includes Barker's "Nighth-breed" and Shiner's "Aftermath". Book 3 features Shiner's "The Sound of One Hand" and Chuck Dixon's "Alien Legion" series.

Also from Epic Comics is THE COMPLETE ALFRED BESTER'S THE STARS MY DESTINATION graphic novel (ISBN 0-87135-881-6, 196 pages, \$21.95), adapted by Byron Preiss and illustrated by Howard Chaykin. This is a monumental work, brilliantly written and beautifully illustrated. I first read Bester's novel back in the mid 50s, and I still feel it's a science fiction novel worth rereading again and again. Very highly recommended.

THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION COMICS by Mike Benton (Taylor Publishing Co, ISBN 0-87833-789-X, \$24.95, 184 pages, 300 color photos, Jun 92) is number 3 in the Taylor History of the Comics series. Aimed primarily at comics collectors (with a complete comics checklist for collectors and a special section on the nuts-and-bolts of collecting), the full-color cover reproductions and detailed notes on artists, writers and editors also appeal to grown up kids like me. I grew up reading TALES FROM THE CRYPT, VAULT OF HORROR, PLANET COMICS, and STARTLING COMICS. My first introduction to Ray Bradbury, Alfie Bester, Manly Wade Wadman, Gardner Fox, Otto Binder, Julie Schwartz, Ed Hamilton, Leigh Brackett, C. L. Moore, H. L. Gold, Mickey Spillane, and Harry Harrison came through comic book stories (and, almost simultaneously, comics' kissing cousins—the pulps). I learned to read from comics, and I financed my first year of full-time freelancing by selling my Golden Age Comics (if I'd kept those comics a few years longer, I could have retired by now the way they've since appreciated). Lots of inside information about writers and artists. Highly recommended.

Alan Jude Summa, well-known to readers of 2AM Magazine as cover artist, story illustrator, and the artist who designed J. N. Williamson's "Dark Corner" logo (and who, by the way, penned the logo that appears at the top of this very column) has teamed up with Glenn Boyd to launch the highly successful *Interplanetary Lizards of the Texas Plains* (Leadbelly Productions, Box 585, Moscow, PA 18444; \$2.50 + \$1.00 s&h). This is the continuing saga of three sentient lizards, marooned on earth in 1850, who battle Tiberius Toad and his evil minions in typical Clint Eastwood style. Lots of gun-blazing action, lots of shadowy-moody split-panel interaction between wonderfully rendered characters, and lots of witty asides by your favorite broccoli-chomping pistol-packing reptiles.

Also from Leadbelly Productions: *The Book of Lost Souls*. This black-and-white illustrated horror anthology features stories by J. Allen Cogliette and Alan Jude Summa, Mike Hurley, and Glenn Boyd. Illustrated by Alan Jude Summa and Charles Dougherty.

Inside Comics, edited by Phil Nutman with help from Steve Bissette, Wayne

Allen Sallee, Craig Shaw Gardner, and a big handful of other knowledgeable folks (Dr. Hannibal Lecter is cited as "Editorial Chef" responsible for midnight snacks), is a huge new monthly omnibus that aims "to become the most comprehensive magazine on comics, period." Filled with interviews, illos, articles, ads, and a massive comics price guide, the first issue (Jun 92, \$3.95, Double Barrel Productions, Inc., Box 67, Sewell, NJ 08080) features inside news of writers, artists, and upcoming publications; reviews of new comics releases; a look at the next generation of comic creators, an interview with Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie by Stephen R. Bissette; an inside look at the first issue of Warren's *Eerie*; an interview with Diamond Distributors Steve Geppi; and lots of other interesting stuff. The second and third issues sold out before I could grab copies, and I suppose I'll have to subscribe. Subs are \$20 for 6 mo.; \$36 for 12.

If you appreciate full-color fantasy art (the kind of paintings and airbrush illos decorating book covers, game covers, and movie posters), you'll marvel at the offerings of Paper Tiger Books (distributed in the US by Avery Publishing Group, 120 Old Broadway, Garden City Park, NY 11040). Originally published in Great Britain and now available in the US, I highly recommend IN THE GARDEN OF UNEARTHLY DELIGHTS: THE PAINTINGS OF JOSH KIRBY (ISBN 1-85028-154-8, 144 pages, \$19.95 + \$3.00 s&h). Filled with Kirby's color cover illos for british editions of books by Craig Shaw Gardner, Robert Silverberg, Ron Goulart, L. Ron Hubbard, Keith Laumer, Brian Aldiss, James Blish, E. C. Tubbs, Neal Barrett Jr., Terry Fratchett, Esther Freisner, and Lin Carter, this collection is pure delight. Also recommended from Paper Tiger/Avery is ULTRATERRANIUM: THE PAINTINGS OF BRUCE PENNINGTON (ISBN 1-85028-167-X, \$19.95).

For those of you who (like me) grew up during the golden age of radio (those thrilling days of yesteryear, before television, when you could read/look at a comic book and listen to Straight Arrow or the Shadow or Bobby Benson's B-Bar-B Riders at the same time), Spine-Tingling Press presents a real treat: mystery, suspense and horror audio books. If you have a cassette player in your car or if you jog to work with a Walkman over your ears, these 90-minute tapes are a wonderful way to eliminate wasted time from

your day. You can listen to top-notch stories by some of horror's finest short story writers while doing everyday mundane chores like washing the dishes, scrubbing the floors, or even making love (the sex scenes in several of these tapes, I imagine, could prove a turn-on for those who like very weird sexual fantasies). Take Abigail, for example, a fictional character in Ronald Kelly's "Miss Abigail's Delicate Condition" on Kelly's DARK DIXIE tape. Abigail Beecher Burke's fascination with cottonmouth snakes is clearly sexual. Most of the stories, however, are hauntingly non-sexual: Joe Citro's marvelous tale of Kirby the shape-changer; Matt Costello's "Caught in Time", a new look at the face of Jack the Ripper; David B. Silva's hypnotic "Slipping" and the Bradbury-esque "Brothers"; Kristine Kathryn Rusch's vivid "Stained Black"; and Kevin J. Anderson's well-written "Hunter's Moon" (which does have a brutal rape scene set in a pumpkin patch). MONSTERS: THREE TALES BY JOSEPH A CITRO (ISBN 0-87554-489-6, 1 90-min tape, \$9.95), CAUGHT IN TIME by Matthew J. Costello (ISBN 0-87554-493-2, 1 tape \$9.95), DARK DIXIE: TALES OF SOUTHERN HORROR by Ronald Kelly (ISBN 0-87554-489-4, 1 tape, \$9.95), HUNTER'S MOON & OTHER AMERICAN GOTHIC TALES (ISBN 0-87554-492-4, 2 tapes, \$14.95), STAINED BLACK by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (ISBN 0-87554-490-8, 2 tapes, \$14.95), and THESE DREAMS THAT SLEEP DISTURBS by David B. Silva (ISBN 0-87554-491-6, 2 tapes, \$14.95). Great repro quality. Highly recommended.

THE HASHISH EATER by Clark Ashton Smith (Fantome Press, Charles M. James, 408 Washington NW, Warren, OH 44483, 60 minute tape, \$4.95 + \$2.95 s&h). Read by Donald Sidney-Fryer. This is part of an experimental art project that includes the eventual development of an accompanying video. Recommended for Clark Ashton Smith completists.

If you're a weird film buff (you don't have to be weird, just a fan of fantastic films), you'll want to subscribe to *Joe Bob Briggs' We Are the Weird*, an irreverent look at films (especially B-movies) and contemporary society by the author of *Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-In*. Published bi-weekly, a 1 year sub is \$35 (half a year is \$19.95) from We Are the Weird, Box 2002, Dallas, TX 75221. This is the only guy I know who counts the number of T & A scenes in a monster movie (oh, sure, he

counts the number of monsters, too; sometimes the number of teeth in the monster's maw; sometimes the number of toothmarks on the bare flesh of a beach bimbo). Joe Bob reviews sci-fi, horror, action-adventure, and off-beat videos releases and comments on sf and fantasy film conventions. Irwin says check it out!

I've ranted and raved about previous issues of *Cemetery Dance* in the past several columns, and I'm still ranting and raving (though I won't devote half this column to telling you why; take a look at the Summer 92 issue and you'll know why I think *Cemetery Dance* is the best horror magazine on the stands today). The Winter 92 and Spring 92 issues of CD are worth raving about, and the Summer issue—which hit the stands in mid-August—is even better (love that spectacular yellow and blue full-color cover, Rich; love Bob Morrish's wonderful interview with publisher-writer John MacLay and Darrell Schweitzer's insightful interview with Dan Simmons; love the advance look at Poppy Z. Brite's first novel; love Tom Monteleone's sage advice on marketing your own novels; love the way Matt Costello shares his fan mail—and I'm glad you didn't respond in writing to that troubled woman whose equally-troubled son killed himself, Matt; you could have opened up whole new can of worms if Senator Mitch McConnell's Pornography victims Compensation Act is signed into law). If you like *2AM Magazine*, you owe it to yourself to pick up a recent copy of *Cemetery Dance*. One year subscriptions are \$15; back issues are \$5; order from Cemetery Dance, Box 18433, Baltimore, MD 21237. The next issue of CD will feature an original (never-before published) Stephen King novella entitled "Chatterbox Teeth." Subscribe now and don't miss it!

S. Darnbrook Colson, self-dubbed "The Bad Boy of Horror", isn't the best horror writer I've ever read (I think maybe I expected too much from someone who calls himself "THE Bad Boy of Horror"). But *SNAKES*, published in a 500-copy 52-page limited-edition chapbook by TAL Publications (Apr 92, \$5.95 + \$1 shipping, available direct from TAL Publications, Box 1837, Leesburg, VA 22075), is a decently delineated fantasy tale that's surprisingly satisfying if you're willing to overlook the three or four scenes of gratuitous violence (including the attempted rape by, and oral castration of, a priest) that the author seemed to throw in as a half-hearted attempt to live up to his erro-

neous appellation as "The Bad Boy of Horror." This is a highly imaginative story that has a wonderful surprise twist at the end, and the well-defined characters show the author's potential as a highly paid writer of high-fantasy or sword-and-sorcery series novels. I love the image of St. Patrick as a motorcycle-riding, leather-jacketed, bar-hopping, whore-chasing, wine-guzzling bad boy—reminiscent of young Brando or James Dean—that Colson so effectively creates; I love bits and pieces of well-worded dialogue that Colson occasionally slips in (hell, I even love all those esses!); and I love the twist ending that Colson effectively foreshadows when Patrick tells Tomasina how he rid Ireland of snakes the first time around. I'd love to see the warlock Patrick McAlpurn return in future tales; meantime, I'm glad I read this story and recommend you try reading S. Darnbrook Colson and see if you agree with me that this guy has an even bigger future in fantasy than he has in horror.

PSYCHOS: AN ANTHOLOGY IN PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR IN VERSE, edited by Michael A. Arnzen (Mastication Publications, 1700 Constitution #D-24, Pueblo, CO 81001; \$6 ppd), is a nice-looking illustrated poetry chapbook that's full of well-crafted images. Superior verse by the best poets in horror; excellent illos by some of the best small-press artists; highly recommended.

Last issue I stated that Gordon Linznor planned to terminate *Space & Time* with issue #80, Summer '92, and that indeed was Gordon's intention. Suddenly, shortly before issue #80 went to press, Gordon received an offer from a fellow SFFWA member that's nothing short of miraculous: if Gordon will continue to edit the magazine, this mysterious benefactor will guarantee adequate financing to publish *Space & Time* twice a year in a perfect-bound format, provide funding to hire assistant editors to handle time-consuming slush-pile screening and replies, and take over the marketing and production duties that are the bane of most small-press editors. It was an offer Gordon couldn't refuse, and I'm happy to announce that *Space & Time* will continue publication for, if not the next twenty years, at least for the foreseeable future.

Quantum: Science Fiction & Fantasy Review will cease publication with issue 43/44, a special double-sized (72 pages) 20th anniversary issue. There's a possibility that *Quantum* (formerly *Thrust*) may

merge with Steve Brown's *Science Fiction Eye*. Like most small press editors, Doug Fratz had to choose between his own writing/editing career and being a publisher (and marketer) of other folks' stuff. There's never enough time and money to do both, and after twenty years of trying to wear several hats something had to give.

The Fall/Winter 92 issue (#17) of *Deathrealm* won't be *Deathrealm*'s last, but editor Mark Rainey announced in a March 27, 1992 editorial that he's indefinitely suspending *Deathrealm*'s regular publication schedule as an indirect consequence of the current economic recession. Mark lost not only his regular bill-paying mundane 9 to 5 job when Precision Typographers went out of business, he also lost the ability to professionally typeset *Deathrealm* without a large outlay of cash for prepress production costs (typesetting, page proofs, camera work, stats, etc.). Unlike most small press magazines, *Deathrealm* has been professionally typeset since its first issue. Until Mark can afford to purchase or lease (and learn to operate) a desktop publishing system, *Deathrealm* will be dearly

missed.

Though the quarterly magazine is on hiatus, *Deathrealms: The Very Best of Deathrealm Magazine* has just been published by Tangram Publishing, PO Box 752, Belfast, ME 04915. Featuring 21 of the best stories and numerous illustrations published by Editor Rainey during the past 5 years, this "Best Of" anthology is available for \$7.95 plus \$2.00 shipping. I haven't seen a copy yet, but the stories have got to be great if they originally appeared in *Deathrealm*.

With the November 92 publication of THE DEFINITIVE BEST OF THE HORROR SHOW by Cemetery Dance Publications, the original BEST OF THE HORROR SHOW published in November 1987 by 2AM Publications will be officially *Out of Print*. All remaining copies of the 2AM edition will be donated to libraries, charities or convention fundraisers before December 31, 1992. If you wish to buy a copy of the original limited trade paperback edition of BEST OF THE HORROR SHOW, please place your order as soon as possible.

2
K
S

(MASQUES cont'd from page 50)

"Before I even approached him," Castle said, "I spoke with people who worked with him and they told me he was the legit goods. Once we started talking, I knew he was the right person for MASQUES and the ball really started rolling."

Campiti's list of Innovation comic adaptations include the series DARK SHADOWS, based on the 60's television show and the newer short-lived 1991 version starring Ben Cross as the vampire Barnabas Collins; and three famous Anne Rice novels: THE VAMPIRE Lestat, QUEEN OF THE DAMNED and INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE.

Other Innovation adaptations in comic shops are LOST IN SPACE, taken from the 70's television show of the same name, Piers Anthony's ON A PALE HORSE, and Gene Wolfe's SHADOW OF THE TORTURER.

"We try to deliver the best we can with that material and MASQUES fits right in," Campiti said, who makes no bones about

targeting material with established or former audiences. "It's a matter of figuring out what we like and what we think we can sell."

Although he was excited about MASQUES from the outset, Campiti admitted that he had been skeptical of Stephen King's and other prominent author participation in the project.

He noted that the last time a Stephen King story made it to comics was almost twenty years ago and that none of Robert R. McCammon's stuff has ever been adapted.

But Castle didn't drop the ball, Campiti said. He promised the cooperation from the 800-pound gorillas and delivered.

"He (Castle) came to me and offered me this book," Campiti said. "I had a lot of people telling me that there's no way to get Stephen King for a comic, but within a couple of weeks we had King on the dotted line."

King will be featured in the second edition and, possibly, future editions, along with Paul Dale Anderson and other heavyweight scribes.

Meanwhile, even though Masques has a headlining crew of prominent writers on deck for publication, Campiti and Castle both said the new comic book is going to adapt some lesser known writers.

"We also want to introduce people that might not be so well-known," Castle said. "Tomorrow's big name is today's discovery."

MASQUES sells for \$4.95 and can be purchased at most comic book shops and outlets.

2
K
S



TWO SECONDS TO TWO

BOOK REVIEWS

reviewed:

THE 38 MOST COMMON FICTION WRITING MISTAKES (AND HOW TO AVOID THEM) by Jack M. Bickham

DARE TO BE A GREAT WRITER: 329 KEYS TO POWERFUL FICTION by Leonard Bishop
WHIPPING BOY by John Byrne
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR WRITING POPULAR FICTION by Robyn Carr

IN THE BLOOD by Nancy A. Collins
FREEDOM YOUR CREATIVITY: A WRITER'S GUIDE by Marshall Cook
HOW TO WRITE WITH THE SKILL OF A MASTER AND THE GENIUS OF A CHILD by Marshall J. Cook

TRICKSTER by Chris Curry and Lisa Dean
IMZADI by Peter David

SHADE by Emily Devenport
BORDERLAND by S. K. Epperson
MARTIAN RAINBOW by Robert L. Forward
DARK CHANNEL by Ray Garton

1992 NOVEL & SHORT STORY WRITER'S MARKET edited by Robin Gee

WRITING MYSTERIES: A HANDBOOK OF THE MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA edited by Sue Grafton

DYING BREATH by Jon A. Harrauld
DEATHGRIP by Brian Hodge

MOMMA'S BOY by Charles King
HIDEAWAY by Dean R. Koontz

SUCCUBI by Edward Lee
ALIEN EARTH by Megan Lindholm

PRIVATE DEMONS by Robert Masello
MASTER OF LIES by Graham Masterton

CHANGING by Rex Miller
THE DEED OF PAKSEVARRION by Elizabeth Moon

THE CALIFORNIA VODOO GAME by Larry Niven & Steven Barnes

THE 28 BIGGEST WRITING BLUNDERS (AND HOW TO AVOID THEM) by William Noble

STOPPING AT SLOWYEAR by Frederik Pohl
SILENT PREY by John Sandford

CHILD OF FAERIE, CHILD OF EARTH by Josepha Sherman

SERPENT MAGE by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman

THE LOUIS L'AMOUR COMPANION by Robert Weinberg

DEATHWALKER by Patrick Whalen
SIBS by F. Paul Wilson

FREAK SHOW edited by F. Paul Wilson
THE WRITER'S DIGEST HANDBOOK OF NOVEL WRITING by the editors of *Writer's Digest*

DARK FORCE RISING by Timothy Zahn

THE 38 MOST COMMON FICTION WRITING MISTAKES (AND HOW TO AVOID THEM) by Jack M. Bickham

(Writer's Digest Books, Feb 92, ISBN 0-

89879-503-6, 117 pages, \$12.95; hc) Jack Bickham is one of us—a working writer with dozens of genre novels to his credit—and he knows what makes a novel work and what makes a writer not work. If you've ever wished for a mentor who would encourage you to continue writing when you felt your most incapable (as I do now; my God, but this sentence is awkward and imperfect and nowhere near what I want to communicate), Jack Bickham's the perfect person to be that mentor. And this book's the perfect tool for any writer who's ever questioned his or her salt as a writer. Just listen to these chapter headings: Don't Make Excuses, Don't Show Off What You Write, Don't Expect Miracles, Don't Write About Wimps, Don't Duck Trouble, Don't Forget Stimulus and Response, Don't Fail to Make the Viewpoint Clear, Don't Lecture Your Reader, Don't Let your Characters Lecture, Either, Don't Be Afraid to Say "Said," Don't Ignore Scene Structure, Don't Forget to Let Your Characters Think, Don't Criticize Yourself to Death, Don't Worry What Mother will Think, Don't Hide From Your Feelings, Don't Chase the Market, Don't Prejudice Your Editor, Don't Give Up, and Don't Just Sit There. This is a very valuable book with the kind of concrete examples you'll find nowhere else. Very highly recommended.
 —reviewed by Irwin Chapman

DARE TO BE A GREAT WRITER: 329 KEYS TO POWERFUL FICTION by Leonard Bishop (Writer's Digest Books, Aug 92, ISBN 0-89879-464-1, 319 pages, \$14.95; tpb) Despite a handful of good ideas, DARE TO BE A GREAT WRITER is a waste of time and money. Leonard Bishop is NOT a great writer (certainly he's not the best non-fiction writer I've read recently, and he doesn't even come close to Robyn Carr or Jack Bickham in showing beginning writers what they need to know). Pass this one up in favor of one of the other writing books I've reviewed in this column.
 —reviewed by Irwin Chapman

WHIPPING BOY by John Byrne (Dell Abyss, Mar 92, ISBN 0-440-21171-9, 498 pages, \$4.99; pb) What happens when a teen-aged boy named Paul Trayne takes away human guilt, leaving the towns-

people of small downstate Faulkner, Illinois free from feeling remorse for their actions? Imagine, if you will, a father and daughter freed from incest taboos, a single mother freed from taking care of her children, a frigid old maid freed from inhibitions, a newspaper editor freed from deadlines, an entire town freed from politically correct words and deeds. And what happens when Paul Trayne moves his evil influence to Chicago? Imagine the police commissioner, the mayor, and their families under the influence of Paul Trayne. What horrors might ensue?

Can an alcoholic newspaper reporter named Donna Wojciechowski, a homosexual priest named Tom Sylvestri, an old washed-up small-town newspaper editor named Ben Carpenter, and a skeptical Chicago newspaper editor named Walker Stone manage to overcome their own debilitating guilt trips in time to stop Paul Trayne and Trayne's Machiavellian father from taking over Chicago (and thence, inevitably, the entire world)? A fast-paced psychological thriller with subtle supernatural elements. Highly recommended.
 —reviewed by Irwin Chapman

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR WRITING POPULAR FICTION by Robyn Carr (Writer's Digest Books, Jul 92, ISBN 0-89879-515-X, 149 pages, \$17.95; hc) Carr's practical advice to writers is right on the mark. If I'd had this book to guide me when I was first starting out, I'd be a rich and famous writer today. Now that I do have this book, I expect my fiction writing technique will improve ten-fold. Highly recommended.
 —reviewed by Irwin Chapman

IN THE BLOOD by Nancy A. Collins (NAL/ROC, ISBN 0-451-45151-1, Jan 92, 302 pages, \$4.99; pb) Sonja Blue, the punk vampire from SUNGLASSES AFTER DARK, is alive and well and seeking revenge in this fast-paced sequel. As Sonja pursues the elusive Lord Morgan, the King Vampire who raped Denise Thorne and turned the innocent teenager into a blood-thirsty Pretender, Sonja uncovers a diabolical plot to create a new race of vampires capable of sexual reproduction. With the help of William Palmer, a chain-smoking private detective in the employ of Dr. Pangloss, Sonja battles

ghosts, fire demons, and psychic re-fields in a desperate attempt to thwart Morgan's plans. As good as Collins's award-winning first novel, *IN THE BLOOD* leaves us yearning for yet another sequel. Highly recommended.
—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

FREED YOUR CREATIVITY: A WRITER'S GUIDE by Marshall Cook (Writer's Digest Books, Feb 92, ISBN 0-89879-506-0, 154 pages, \$17.95; hc) If good writing thrives on detail, then writers need to learn how to recognize the minute details and include them in their work. Cook wakes us up and shows us how to pay attention to details. I especially liked self-talk "Talk-back" statements in the chapter "What's Getting in Your Way". Recommended.
—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

HOW TO WRITE WITH THE SKILL OF A MASTER AND THE GENIUS OF A CHILD by Marshall J. Cook (Writer's Digest Books, Jul 92, ISBN 0-89879-529-X, 208 pages, \$18.95; hc) Remember the "terrible twos" when your favorite word in the whole world was "why?" Remember what it was like to explore the world with fresh eyes and the exhilarating feeling of learning the meanings of new words? Remember how it used to do things spontaneously without worrying about being embarrassed (or embarrassing someone else)? This book is designed to help you remember. Highly inspirational.
—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

TRICKSTER by Chris Curry and Lisa Dean (Pocket Books, Aug 92, ISBN 0-671-68434-5, 385 pages, \$4.99; pb) Mixing authentic Pacific NW American Indian mythology with highly informative street scenes of modern and historical Seattle, this well written woman-in-jeopardy/possessed serial killer mystery will keep your interest—and keep you guessing—throughout. Walker Charlie, a disabled Viet Nam vet and Indian medicine man who is now living like a homeless street person on the streets of downtown Seattle (Walker's not homeless; he has an apartment in the same building as Dennis Wolfe, the heroine's love interest and one of the novel's heroes), uses animal totems to describe people's personalities the way his ancestors did. Dori Gallagher, intrepid girl reporter and the story's heroine, is a Raven; Dennis Wolfe is, of course, a wolf; Walker Charlie is an owl; Homicide Detective Phil Waterman

is also an owl; and Trickster is a Sea Otter. But who is the modern physical embodiment of Trickster, and why is he viciously killing (after first raping and then stealing the victim's pituitary gland with a pickle fork shoved up the nose to scrape the pituitary from the brain) both male and female targets of opportunity? Is Seth Shepherd, physically and sexually abused by his mother during a tortured childhood he's since repressed, the diabolical Trickster? Or is Dori wrong to suspect Seth? The authors devise several nicely foreshadowed twists to keep you guessing, and you'll probably be surprised by the inevitable resolution. Nicely done and highly recommended.
—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

IMZADI by Peter David (Pocket Books, 342 pages, \$20.00) *IMZADI*, the second hardcover novel based on "Star Trek: The Next Generation," is not only one of the best of the "Star Trek" novels ever—and I've read every single one of them—but a fine novel in its own right. Set firmly in the "Star Trek" universe, the book borrows elements wisely from the best of both series with admirable results.

On a very basic level, the novel tells the story of the tempestuous relationship between Cmdr. William Riker and Counselor Deanna Troi before they began serving aboard the Enterprise. Author Peter David, who has written seven previous Trek novels (in both series) as well as comics, tells the story of their first meeting with a good deal of humor, as thing do not go exactly well between the two at first blush.

And if this were simply the backstory of these two characters' lives, then it may have stood as a fairly interesting novel, but that would have been it. Where *IMZADI* takes wing and soars above most of its rivals is in the more complex tale David has chosen to tell.

The novel begins at a time just ahead of the television series. The Enterprise crew is beginning negotiations with a thorny group of aliens when Troi is suddenly stricken ill and dies within minutes. For the rest of his life, Riker is haunted by his inability to save Troi, and of how they had wasted the time they had before that time.

Finally, as an old man, Riker takes a desperate gamble which could cost him everything in an attempt to set right what he perceives as a cosmic imbalance. To do this, author David makes use of a device from one of the original series'

most memorable episodes, and sets in motion events which allow the characters to be explored in far more depth than would otherwise have been possible in a more commonplace linear plotline.

This theme, that of a person willing to lay everything on the line for a friend, is a classic Trek theme, and in fact formed the basis for the middle trilogy of the film series. And the idea of a man fated to set aright a cosmic imbalance has propelled works as diverse as Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and Stephen King's *PET SEMETARY*. *IMZADI* is an excellent *ST:TNG* novel, and a fine science fiction novel in its own right.

—reviewed by Tyson Blue

SHADE by Emily Devenport (ROC, ISBN 0-451-45062-0, Dec 91, 246 pages, \$4.99; pb) *Shade* is a Deadtown, a teen-age runaway with no job and no future. When she teams up with Knossos, an Aesopian elephant man, she bets her life and psi-talents in a desperate gamble to win a new world. Filled with future-speak, this first novel provides a fresh look at today's rampant greed (and our throw-away attitude toward children) from a unique science fiction perspective. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

BORDERLAND by S. K. Epperson (Donald I. Fine, Mar 92, ISBN 1-55611-317-X, 298 pages, \$19.95; hc) I've praised Epperson's two previous novels (*BROTHER LOWDOWN* and *DUMFORD BLOOD*, both psychological horror) for their wonderful characterization, and I was understandably apprehensive that Epperson might let the intrusion of supernatural elements (specifically, the ghostly revenant of the woman who's murdered in the Prologue) intrude in *BORDERLAND*'s storyline at the expense of her characters. Not to worry. Nolan Wulf, Vic Kimmier, Myra Callahan, Cal, Christa and Andy are all well-developed three-dimensional characters that magically interplay in the wonderful Epperson style. It wasn't until the very end of the novel that the ghost's presence made any sense, but Epperson pulls off a surprise ending (several interesting twists that work well) and ties the storyline up in a neat package that's more than satisfying. This is a contemporary story of centuries-old rape, cannibalism, incest, and greed set in a small Kansas town where outsiders have a life-expectancy of less than 24 hours. Wulf, Kimmier, Callahan,

and the kids are outsiders. Lahr, Kisner, Schwartz, and the rest of the townspeople are the evil and corrupt insiders. What really makes the story work, however, is the sexual tension between Nolan and Myra—Epperson is an expert at building sexual tension between two people who are obviously meant for each other but who have to overcome some character flaw (or some terrible secret from their past) that stands in the way of their getting together. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

MARTIAN RAINBOW by Robert L. Forward (Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37772-9, Jul 92, 308 pages, \$4.99; pb) This book reminded me, in story and style, of Ben Bova's Kinsman saga. It's the tale of a Martian colony, made up of military types and scientists who are all deeply loyal to their respective counties—until things begin to go wrong. What goes wrong is the brother of one of the Martian colonist's leaders becomes a cult leader on Earth and eventually takes over the entire planet. A bit far reaching, I know, but stranger things have happened and stranger things have been successfully pulled off by other writers. Unfortunately, Forward is not of that caliber yet.

Of course there is a love interest in a beautiful Russian scientist and the expected conflict between the leader of the Martian colony and his brother on Earth. And I guess that's the problem I have with this book. There are no surprises, even with some of the bizarre happenings, and Forward just sort of chugs along, moving his characters through their paces with a regularity that's admirable if a bit tedious. The only excitement generated is when Forward gets off describing the detail of the Martian landscape. As I mentioned before, this book reminds me of Bova and it also reminds me of early Heinlein. Now that's certainly a couple of admirable comparisons except for the fact that I think both early Heinlein and Bova managed to pull off such ploys with a bit more force and entertainment.

There's nothing wrong with this and I would recommend this book with the following qualifications. You're looking for an interesting read but don't expect to be challenged and don't expect to be so involved that you won't want to put the book down.

—reviewed by Steven Sawicki

DARK CHANNEL by Ray Garton (Bar-

tam, May 92, ISBN 0-553-2S190-4, 436 pages, \$4.99; pb) Is Hester Thorne actually a new-age channeler for an ancient spirit called Orrin who can miraculously show us the way to a better world, or is Hester possessed by the Devil? When ordinary Christian televangelists, whose audiences are flocking to Hester like flies to excrement, publically criticize Hester's new-age movement, those televangelists mysteriously die; when reporters investigate Hester's organization, those reporters die or disappear; when hardboiled P. Ls Jordan Cross and Marvyn Ackroyd investigate the mysterious disappearance of children at Hester's northern California Universal Enlightened Alliance retreat, they discover much more than they bargained for. With the future of the world in the balance, can Cross and Ackroyd (with the help of a small band of select friends they meet along the way) stop Hester and the evil entity that possesses her in time? Is faith in God really a stronger power than pure evil? Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

1992 NOVEL & SHORT STORY WRITER'S MARKET edited by Robin Gee (Writer's Digest Books, Feb 92, ISBN 0-89879-486-2, 672 pages, \$19.95; tpb) 90% newly updated, this annual market listing is essential reading for all fiction writers. Of special interest to readers of *2AM* is J. N. Williamson's lively "Putting Humor in Your Horror". This essential reference work is very highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

WRITING MYSTERIES: A HANDBOOK BY THE MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA edited by Sue Grafton (Writer's Digest Books, Feb 92, ISBN 0-89879-502-8, 208 pages, \$18.95; hc) This is the definitive text on how to write a mystery by those who do the dirty deed daily for a living. Tony Hillerman's *Laws for Writers*: "Never polish the first chapter until the last chapter is written" and "Some people... can write a novel without an outline" are truisms, of course; but Hillerman's examples of how his novels evolve (change from initial concept) give real meaning to Robert Campbell's chapter on "Outlining". Hillerman's and Campbell's chapters are worth the price of the book. Essential reading and highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

DYING BREATH by Jon A. Harrauld (Pocket Books, Aug 92, ISBN 0-671-69029-9, 422 pages; pb) Women in Jeopardy novels are big this year, and the accomplished husband and wife writing team of Harold Schechter and Jonna Semeiks have created a real winner with *DYING BREATH*. Remember Winston Smith's greatest fear in George Orwell's *1984*? Remember what Big Brother did to Smith in Room 101? Simon Proctor does something similar to Marianne Byrne in *DYING BREATH*. Whatever your greatest fear (your child being kidnapped and murdered, the desecration of what you hold to be the most holy of all religious relics, being skinned alive, being fed worms or fed to the worms—or substitute rats for worms if you so desire), Schechter and Semeiks—writing under the pseudonym of Jon A. Harrauld—will turn that fear into a full-fledged phobia. This novel of satanism pulls out all the stops, folks. Nekkid orgies (with drugged teen-aged highschoolers having a great time), necrophilia, rampant paranoia (someone's out to kill you and that someone's a cop or your spouse or your lover), infant sacrifice to pagan demons, child porno, a charismatic Charlie Manson-type serial killer, you name it! The story works because things like this are real and Schechter (author of *DEVIANT* and *DERANGED*) isn't about to self-censor the story to death because some parents might be afraid to be reminded that their children could be involved in anything so unthinkable. Great storyline, well-rendered three-dimensional characters. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

DEATHGRIP by Brian Hodge (Dell Abyss, Jun 92, ISBN 0-440-21112-3, 481 pages, \$4.99; pb) I've recommended this novel for a Bram Stoker Award because I can honestly say, without any reservations, *DEATHGRIP* is the best novel I've read this year. Hodge has come a long ways from his early days as *THE HORROR SHOW* regular, and *DEATHGRIP* is full fruition of the promise shown in his earlier novels (*NIGHTLIFE*, *OASIS*, *DARK ADVENT*). Paul Handler is a fully-developed character, neither all good nor all bad (hell, no one in this story—as in real life—is all good or bad), that readers can readily identify with. Paul's lovesick-puppy longings for Lorraine Savage (and Lorraine's wonderfully-delineated teasing of the poor boy) will drag you quickly into the storyline, and

by the time Hodge introduces the rest of the main characters (Donny Dawson and Gabe Matthews) you'll be hooked and can't stop reading. Novels that span millennia (the roots of this story begin in ancient Sumaria at the dawn of recorded history) are sometimes difficult to tie together, but Hodge effectively uses Paul and Gabe as the focal points for two converging storylines that collide in an Armageddon-like climax that has the potential to wipe out all human life on earth. Paul Handler, you see, has not only the power to heal—to take the sickness and corruption of those he touches into his own body—but to take all the stored-up sickness and corruption his body has assimilated and release it into healthy tissue. Believe me, this is one guy you don't want to piss off! And what happens when Paul finally does get pissed off? What happens when his brainwaves are hooked up to microwave antennas that'll transmit his ability to heal or destroy worldwide and Gabe Matthews goes off the deep end and kills the woman Paul loves while Paul's transmitting? Very highly recommended. Don't miss this one!

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

MOMMA'S BOY by Charles King (Pocket Books, ISBN 0-671-74469-0, Apr 92, 378 pages, \$20.00; hc) I assume Charles is no relation to Stephen. Though this novel is no match for a Stephen King masterwork, **MOMMA'S BOY** is surprisingly good for a first novel and I couldn't stop reading this fast-paced thriller. Pitting a medal-winning NYC detective against a CIA-trained sociopathic killer, Charles King builds reader involvement by creating three-dimensional characters readers want to care about. Jake's compassionate efforts to bring Winston out of his shell, Sally's all-too-human efforts to impress a well-known writer in order to get him to read her novel and recommend it to an agent, Lamb's attempt to compensate for his incredibly fucked-up childhood, all seem credible motivations for a nicely convoluted plot that culminates in a nicely satisfying climax. Recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

HIDEAWAY by Dean R. Koontz (Putnam, ISBN 0-399-13673-8, Jan 92, 384 pages, \$22.95; hc) Trying to second-guess Dean Koontz is risky business—but half the fun of reading a Koontz novel. Dean fore-shadows almost everything so perfectly that readers can't resist trying to second-

guess the twists and turns of the rollercoaster as it hurtles seemingly out of control to inevitable thrill-a-minute climax. But Dean's tightly-controlled prose (he's a grandmaster of pacing) pulls together thousands of tiny details that defy second guesses. Just when you're sure you know what'll happen next, Dean throws in a curve you didn't expect.

If you've read other Koontz novels, you know where **HIDEAWAY** is heading right from the beginning. But getting there—the suspense of knowing what's going to happen but not knowing exactly *when* or *how*—is what makes **HIDEAWAY** special.

I won't spoil the fun for you by saying too much about the storyline. There really is a rollercoaster in this novel (a millipede at Fantasy World theme park), a man brought back from the dead (two men, actually; both the protagonist and the antagonist), a supernatural element that's fueled with symbolism from religious art, and a darling little girl who has a misshapen hand and a deformed leg (and who attempts to make deals with God, thus raising questions about the nature of God and the power of Roman Catholic doctrine that so many of us—Koontz included—were raised with). **HIDEAWAY** is a fast, fun read. The opening car crash into icy water and the death and resurrection of the protagonist will hook you and keep you reading. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

SUCCUBI by Edward Lee (Diamond, Mar 92, ISBN 1-55773-676-6, 258 pages, \$4.50; pb) Edward Lee is becoming a great horror writer. Parts of **SUCCUBI** are excellent, and the entire novel is more than craftsmanlike. Combining elements of woman-in-jeopardy and supernatural horror, Lee constructs a formula thriller that's fast-paced and a good read. Recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

ALIEN EARTH by Megan Lindholm (Bantam Spectra, Jul 92, ISBN 0-553-29749-X, 385 pages, \$5.99; pb) Imagine a future Earth so polluted that humans can no longer survive anywhere on the planet. Imagine an intelligent race called the Arthroplana offering to transport humanity to a new home lightyears away by placing humans in "waitsleep" aboard gondolas attached to the bodies of hundreds of Beastships. Imagine that, contrary to what humans have been told by

Arthroplana, Beastships are intelligent creatures that can think and feel—and can not only travel the universe but can sense the universe on a grand scale that humans can't even begin to imagine. Lindholm is an extremely accomplished writer who introduces such imaginings in the minds of three very sympathetic characters aboard the Beastship *Evangeline*: the pre-adolescent captain (John, 93rd generation after the exodus), the sole crewperson (Connie), and a stowaway (Terrence Raefferly—Rae!) who's been dreaming in waitsleep since the original exodus. Eventually, Lindholm also links us with the minds of Tug, the parasitic (both literally and figuratively) Arthroplana that controls *Evangeline*, and *Evangeline* herself (as over the centuries *Evangeline* learns to assimilate human words and concepts from Rae's waitsleep dreams). This is a marvelous book, reminiscent of the best of Fredrick Pohl and Sheri Tupper. I nominated **ALIEN EARTH** for a Nebula. Very highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

PRIVATE DEMONS by Robert Masello (Jove, Aug 92, ISBN 0-515-10806-0, 311 pages, \$4.99; pb) The scene where Sister Celeste first ventures into the snake-filled temple of Kaliya to save the entranced native boy from the deadly fangs of the King of the Cobras is so vivid that I felt like I was inside her body every step of the way. How Masello masterfully ties together—in slightly more than 300 pages—such disparate storylines as drug smuggling, international shipping conglomerates, the killing fields of Cambodia, the playing fields of Eaton, the degenerate lifestyle and saccharine poetry of Swinburne, the essential elements of Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism (including stigmata and demonology), guided tours of Bangkok and London, the rape and drowning of a beautiful young girl who becomes a prescient ghost, gemstone mining, modern-day piracy, and a heart-warming love story that'll knock your socks off is truly amazing. A good read that's highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

MASTER OF LIES by Graham Masterton (TOR, ISBN 0-312-85102-2, Jan 92, 330 pages, \$19.95; hc) Beli Ya'al (or Belial, a fallen angel who was cast out of heaven, in the more-familiar Judeo-Christian mythos) is a Chthulu-Like eldritch god who has been sleeping and dreaming for thousands of generations, waiting for the

requisite call (and attendant human sacrifices) that will awaken him and set him free to feed on a thousand human souls. When San Francisco suffers a series of brutal ritual-like serial killings perpetrated by a masked man the press dubs "The Fog City Satan," police lieutenant Larry Foggia is assigned to crack the case. By story's end Foggia's entire family (even his long-dead father) fall victim to Belial, the Master of Lies. Two very powerful scenes (the crucifixion of the Berry family and the castration of Wilbert Fraser) will remain in your memory forever. Master-ton is a masterful writer who mixes police procedural and authentic-seeming psychic phenomena into a complex storyline. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

CHAINGANG by Rex Miller (Pocket Books, Nov 92, ISBN 0-671-74847-5, 311 pages, \$4.99; pb) Miller's 500-pound killing machine (introduced in SLOB and immortalized in short stories and by the Northstar comic book fiasco) is back, released from a top-secret high-security government mental institution so he can hone his killing skills on the unsuspecting denizens of a drug-connected Missouri backwater named Waterton, MO. Filled with idiotic scenes of gratuitous violence designed to make Daniel Flowers Bunkowski seem like a cult hero (which he was after the Silbersack-edited SLOB appeared back in '87), this novel lacks the smooth polish of Miller's previous work. Royce Hawthorne is no Jack Eichord (I knew Jack Eichord from SLOB, SLICE, ICEMAN, and STONE SHADOW, and believe me, Mr. Hawthorne, you're no Jack Eichord). Eichord was a recovering alcoholic and Hawthorne is a recovering cocaine addict. Eichord was a cop working a federal task-force that tracked serial killers and Hawthorne is a "half-assed undercover narc", but the similarities end there. Hawthorne doesn't become a sympathetic character until 250 pages into the story (if even then), and the only thrilling episode in the entire novel occurs near the end after a high-speed car chase when Hawthorne and Chaingang Bunkowski become allies of sorts for a few short minutes. Recommended for Rex Miller completists and die-hard Chaingang Bunkowski fanatics.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

THE DEED OF PAKSENARRION by Elizabeth Moon (Baen Books, Feb 92, ISBN 0-671-72104-6, 1024 pages,

\$12.00, Oversize pb) Back in 1988/89, Elizabeth Moon put out a trilogy concerning a sheepfarmer's daughter and her dreams of becoming a paladin. The series did not draw the attention then it deserved and now Baen has gathered all three books under a single cover.

Let me start off by saying that this is one large read. While some many-page novels are hefty due to nothing more than spreading out a lot of large-print words on the page, this book is nearly the exact opposite. Plan to spend a bit of time reading and enjoying this.

I guess, first off one must deal with the comparisons to Tolkien (particularly since such comparison is rampant in the blurbs and other PR hype). While there are certainly Orcs and other beasts and while Paksenarrion does go on a quest, there the comparison ends. THE DEED OF PAKSENARRION is not a Tolkien clone, in fact, it seems to draw more from the Dungeons & Dragons worlds than from anything else. (I know, D&D was based, more or less, on Tolkien.) DEED is well enough written and entertaining enough to stand on its own. Moon's vivid description of military life, the detail given to training and arms practice and her characterization make the book first rate. From the first page, Moon begins weaving a tapestry that draws your interest. She shows you just enough to keep your interest but never enough to give you all the answers. The only flaw in the entire book comes near the conclusion of the final quest where it becomes fairly obvious to the reader who is being quested after. Granted we realize this only a few pages before Paksenarrion does, but then, she is a heroine and supposed to be smarter than us. This is a nit and a tiny one at that and should in absolutely no way deter you from rushing out and beating your book-seller about the head and shoulders for a copy.

—reviewed by Steven Sawicki

THE CALIFORNIA VODOO GAME by Larry Niven & Steven Barnes (Del Rey Jan 92, 355 pages, \$20.00) This is the third entry in the DREAM PARK series, building on the first two books and using many of the same characters while maintaining a completely separate direction. In a sense, the DREAM PARK books are formula. Each is centered around a "Game" held in a theme park of the future where Role Playing Games have become fully fleshed adventures and the entire RPG world has become commercial.

Each game is thematic in nature, developed by "game masters" and geared to players with a better than working knowledge of the system. Each book also includes a mystery which involves the game itself and ultimately draws in the *Dream Park* security Chief, one Alex Griffin, whose mission is to not only survive the game but to figure the whole thing out. The gamers are back, this time in full force as five separate teams compete against each other in a cavernous building converted to the twisted ideas of five different game masters. Obviously Voodoo plays a large role in the game itself and also provides plenty of beasts and danger as the gamers work their way to game's end.

Even given the rather sturdy and seen-before framework, THE CALIFORNIA VODOO GAME works. It does start rather slow as Niven and Barnes choose a misdirection for a beginning. In fact, it starts so slowly and is so bereft of information at the start that one may be driven to give up on it. This would be a mistake as by Chapter five, the game's afoot and the pace becomes furious.

Niven and Barnes have constructed a story that is nothing less than a Chinese puzzle—a game, within a game, within a game.... Unraveling the clues and trying to beat Alex Griffin to the punch proves almost as entertaining as the novel itself. Nothing is given away and yet nearly everything is there. And the characters are interesting enough that we don't really care that they are rather two-dimensional—all that internal struggle and decision making would only clog the action. Technology is the boss here and the people are merely ants being put through their paces. There's enough angst to go around and enough emotion to drive the characters and nothing more is needed. This book will not make you think great thoughts or ponder the state of the world. It will keep you turning the pages, though; and ultimately that's why we all read.

—reviewed by Steven Sawicki

THE 28 BIGGEST WRITING BLUNDERS (AND HOW TO AVOID THEM) by William Noble (Writer's Digest Books, Feb 92, ISBN 0-89879-504-4, 120 pages, \$12.95; hc) This is a book about style and attitude, not a book about grammar. Or so the author claims. But it's a grammar book, too: a rule book for when to break the rules of grammar you learned back in 8th grade. Noble stresses technique, but urges the beginning writer to avoid getting hung up on grammar and

style to the exclusion of rhythm. A worthwhile eye-opener for novices and seasoned pros alike.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

STOPPING AT SLOWYEAR by Frederik Pohl (Bantam Spectra, Jun 92, ISBN 0-553-29487-3, Jun 92, 151 pages, \$3.50; pb) As the starship *Nordvik*, a tramp trader wholly owned and operated by a crewmember cooperative, approaches the planet *Slowyear* (so named because it takes approximately 20 earth years to constitute six seasons on this planet—ranging from extremely cold in the winter to unbearably hot in the summer), Mercy MacDonald contemplates jumping ship. Life aboard the *Nordvik* has become intolerable, thanks in part to the incessant sexual advances of deputy captain Hans Horeger and the lack of other available men to service the row predominantly female crew (Mercy's own husband jumped ship at the last port of call). When Mercy meets Blundy—a shuttle pilot, video star, politician and sheepherder on *Slowyear*—sexual tensions reach critical mass. Blundy's wife Murra and his mistress Petoyne are unable (or unwilling) to prevent Blundy from inviting Mercy MacDonald to share his tent during a tax-duty stint tending a flock of sheep in the wilderness, and one begins to wonder why the ladies do not protest more. The truth comes out in the end, of course; Pohl is a master of this kind of story—slowly building up characterization and plausible planetary impediments until the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle falls neatly into place and the big picture smacks you squarely in the face and you wonder why all this wasn't evident before because surely the author had hinted at this outcome and foreshadowed the Great Truth throughout most of the story. I like Fred Pohl's work a lot. **STOPPING AT SLOWYEAR** is top-notch science fiction.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

SILENT PREY by John Sandford (Putnam, ISBN 0-395-13742-4, Mar 92, 329 pages, \$21.95; 95) and **EYES OF PREY** by John Sandford (Berkley, ISBN 0-425-13204-8, Mar 92, 358 pages, \$5.99; pb). The bestselling author of **RULES OF PREY** and **SHADOW PREY** twice again brings inrepid Minneapolis detective Lucas Davenport back to tackle another serial killer (actually a pair of serial killers in **EYES**, one of which survives to run amok in **SILENT**), and I'm happy as hell to be able to renew well-

established acquaintanceships with old friends like Sloan, Daniel, Elle, and Lily. Sandford's characters seem alive to me: real flesh and blood human beings with enough human foibles, character flaws and psychological trauma to keep a clinical psychologist (or a homicide task force) employed full-time for decades. Davenport, whose office is a converted janitor's closet in the basement of the Minneapolis municipal building, is as emotionally fucked up as the criminals he chases, and there's a weird kind of mutual respect and intuitive understanding between Davenport and the obsessed predators he tracks. Davenport's the kind of crazy bastard who relies on police work to keep him sane.

Dr. Michael Bekker, Davenport's dual-personality nemesis in **EYES** and **SILENT**, is a once-brilliant research pathologist and compulsive drug addict who goes from getting his jollies from staring into the eyes of dying patients to killing people (after cutting off their eyelids) so he can watch them "pass over." After catching Bekker once, Davenport pursues the escaped maniac to New York city at the request of Lily Rotherburg (his main squeeze in **SHADOW PREY**) and becomes involved in a high-level high-tech conspiracy within the ranks of NYPD. What makes a John Sandford novel extra special are the simultaneous sub-plots that complicate the main storyline. Both books are highly recommended.

—reviewed by Paul Dale Anderson

CHILD OF FAERIE, CHILD OF EARTH by Joseph Sherman (Walker, Apr 92, ISBN 0-8027-8112-8, 159 pages, Apr 92, \$14.95; hc) Sherman has crafted a marvelous tale of mixed worlds—Faerie and medieval earth—where Graciosa and Percinet, young lovers of mixed blood, work their own special magic on each other. Percinet, son of the Queen of Faerie and a human father, views the beautiful 17-year-old Graciosa in a magic mirror and falls head-over-heels in love with her. Graciosa, daughter of a gold-hungry widower count who marries the ugly Lady Grognon becomes a Cinderella-like figure under the hateful hand of her evil stepmother. When prince Percinet ferries her away to Faerie after Grognon's henchmen abduct the girl agd try to kill her (thwarted in the nick of time by Percinet's magic), Graciosa fearfully rejects Faerie and her own latent magic powers. Magic is evil, claim the mortal priests of 12th century France, and to use

magic is to condemn one's mortal soul to the fires of hell (or, according to human legend, to slavery in Faerie). But what is Graciosa to do when the evil Grognon (herself a sorceress with a pet demon) imprisons the girl and forces her to perform an impossible task or die on the gallows? Is it less of a sin to work magic than to commit suicide by refusing to save oneself? Superbly written, as much a joy to 47-year-old males like me as to the young adult female audience this book was intended, I heartily recommend **CHILD OF FAERIE, CHILD OF EARTH** to anyone and everyone who believes in (or yearns for) real magic. This is an important book that works on several different levels of meaning for teenagers, confused about what they've been told is right and what they feel is right, to read. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

SERPENT MAGE by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman (Bantam, 420 pages, \$20.00) Perhaps the best recommendation I can give to Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's **DEATHGATE CYCLE**, whose fourth volume, **SERPENT MAGE**, is new in hardcover from Bantam, is to say that I have been with it since the beginning and am eagerly awaiting each new volume, despite a profound dislike for the entire Tolkien-clone light fantasy genre.

What draws me to this series is the detailed world-building going on here. Each of the four books published so far takes places in a different world, all four once part of a unified world which was sundered long ago. After this just-completed introduction, the three-volume **Finalate** details a war to reunite these four disparate worlds into one.

In **SERPENT MAGE**, our hero, Haplo, journeys to Chelestra, a water-world, where living land-masses drift, surrounded by water which neutralizes the runes which give him his magic. Powerless, Haplo is rescued by and befriends a group of elves, dwarves and humans who are fleeing a race of powerful dragonsnakes who have destroyed their homelands. They are seeking to reach Surunan, the home of the legendary and arrogant Sartan, Haplo's sworn enemies and the engineers of the Sundering.

Meanwhile, Alfred, an outcast Sartan who has been Haplo's companion through his journeys in the past, has at last found his people, only to realize that they are plotting the destruction of the other races, or at least their subjugation.

As the novel reaches its cliffhanging climax, reader will learn new things about the worlds encountered in previous books in the cycle, including the true purpose of the mysterious Kicksey-winsay device from the first book, *DRAGON WING*. At the same time, the wheels of war are beginning to grind as this seven-part series moves into its final laps.

For ten years, I read and wrote virtually nothing but sword and sorcery, until I was thoroughly sickened by it. But the intricacy, the uniqueness and the humor of the *DEATH GATE CYCLE* has held my interest through four volumes. I'd suggest you give it a try.

—reviewed by Tyson Blue

THE LOUIS L'AMOUR COMPANION by Robert Weinberg (Andrews and McMeel, ISBN 0-8362-7006-4, 307 pages, \$12.95; pb) If you're a book collector, a pulp fiction historian, an aspiring writer of formula fiction, a fan of well-crafted westerns, or a Louis L'Amour completist, this book's most definitely required reading. Filled with interviews with L'Amour and reminiscences of the man (there's even a short tribute by Harlan Ellison), *THE LOUIS L'AMOUR COMPANION* also contains selected letters of the author, various articles he penned over the years, and knowledgeable (as opposed to merely academic) analyses of his fiction by Ed Gorman, Judith Tarr, Robert Sampson, and other working writers. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

DEATHWALKER by Patrick Whalen (Pocket Books, Sep 92, ISBN 0-671-74636-7, 284 pages, \$4.99; pb) John Winter is dying of an incurable disease, but the top secret government agency that's employed Winter for more than a decade as a hit man won't let him retire to die in peace. When agents Winter himself trained to be ruthless assassins try to take him out (not as an act of mercy but in fear he might spill the beans about the agency on his deathbed), he masterfully outsmarts them and flees across country to hide in a small town at the foot of the volcanic mountains of Washington state (specifically, Mt. St. Helens). With Buddha—his faithful Doberman pinscher that's big as a horse and smart as a person (and who sneezes when he's happy)—at his side, Winter takes one look at the majestic mountain and decides this is where he wants to die. Unfortunately, this is also where the evil Death-

walker-Witiko, half ancient Indian spirit and half human, lies buried inside the sleeping mountain. When a series of earthquakes unearths the Witiko and sets him free to turn townspeople into zombies, Winter is forced to betray his identity to help the local police chief, the lovely Erin O'Donnell with whom—despite his terminal illness—Winter falls in love. Will Winter stop the Witiko before government agents riddle Winter's already pain-riddled body with bullets? Will Mount St. Helens explode and bury the town before Erin and the townspeople escape? A superbly written tale that blends espionage-action/adventure with supernatural horror. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

SIBS by F. Paul Wilson (Dark Harvest, ISBN 0-913165-61-1, 1991, 280 pages, \$21.95; hc) Kelly and Kara Wade are twins. When Kelly mysteriously dies, Kara returns to NYC to discover why her sister fell—or was pushed—from a downtown Manhattan hotel window, clad only in sexy garterbelt and hose. Told from alternating viewpoints (Wilson has an amazing gift for getting inside—and putting the reader inside—the minds of his characters), *SIBS* is a suspenseful psychological thriller with a supernatural twist. Was Kelly Wade possessed when she made love to two men and then leapt to her untimely death? Is the same evil entity now possessing Kara? Can NYC detective Rob Harris solve the mystery in time to save Kara and Kara's daughter from a fate worse than death? Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

FREAK SHOW edited by F. Paul Wilson (Pocket Books, Sep 92, ISBN 0-671-69574-6, 372 pages, \$5.50; pb) This second HWA anthology is almost as bad as the first. Oh, sure, there are more than a few competent vignettes by extremely capable writers (Wilson, Brad Strickland, Gregory Nicoll, Rex Miller, Nancy Kilpatrick, Scott Cupp, Kathryn Ptacek, Douglas Borton, Morgan Fields, Richard Lee Byers, Dan Simmons, Yvonne Navarro, Steven Spruill, Lee Moler, Chet Williamson, Craig Shaw Gardner, R. Patrick Gates and Thomas F. Monteone), but the shared-world format just doesn't (not in this anthology or any other, in my humble opinion) allow for creation of well-developed characters or any decent sense of story. Why any authors' organization would encourage anything that

comes this close to a work-for-hire project is beyond me! Not recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

THE WRITER'S DIGEST HANDBOOK OF NOVEL WRITING by the editors of *Writer's Digest* (*Writer's Digest* Books, Jan 92, ISBN 0-89879-507-9, 260 pages, \$18.95; hc) Russell Galen's "How to Chart Your Path to the Bestseller List" is worth the price of this book, Jack M. Bickham's "Scene and Sequel: The Two Keys to Strong Plots" is worth the price of this book, "Creating Characters That Readers Care About" by Orson Scott Card is worth the price of this book, and at least six other chapters in this book are worth the price of the book, too. At \$18.95, this book's a steal. Highly recommended.

—reviewed by Irwin Chapman

DARK FORCE RISING by Timothy Zahn (Bantam, 376 pages, \$18.50) Last summer, Bantam/Spectra and Lucasfilms delighted readers and filmgoers the world over by releasing the first in a trilogy of new novels based on the character in the "Star Wars" series, that novel, *HEIR TO THE EMPIRE*, took place five years after the events of "Return of the Jedi," and told of a new threat rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the fallen Empire. In a far corner of the galaxy, Grand Admiral Thrawn begins assembling the tatters of the Empire into a new force to attempt to topple the New Republic, assisted by a mad Jedi master named C'Boath, and of the first failed attack on the Rebel ships.

The new novel, *DARK FORCE RISING*, picks up where the first novel left off and is much better than the first. Having failed in their first attempt, the villains from *Heir* are back for a second try at Luke Skywalker and friends. This time, both sides are struggling to get their hands on the *Katana Fleet*, also known as the dark fleet, a huge cache of star-dreadnoughts lost for decades in an isolated sector of space, ships which are badly needed by both sides. The group which obtains these ships first would gain supremacy in the newly-reheated Star Wars.

Like "The Empire Strikes Back," this novel is even better than the work which went before it. Zahn succeeds better in capturing the feel and pace of the films, and seems to be fitting into his role as chronicler of the adventures of characters who, in a little over ten years, have become cultural icons as powerful as James Bond or Tarzan.

And like "Empire," the novel ends on a cliffhanger which will leave readers hanging for another year, which seems like a rotten thing to do until you recall that filmgoers had to wait three years to find out whether or not Han Solo got thawed out of that block of carbonite!

DARK FORCE RISING is also consistent with the events set later in the story which are going on in *Dark Horse Comics' "Star Wars: Dark Empire"* comic, which I highly recommend as well—the second volume featured the only moment I've ever run across in 35 years of comics reading which actually made me drop my jaw and say, "Wow!"

But as to the new novel, I recommend it highly for anyone who enjoyed the "Star Wars" films and wanted more. It is infinitely better than the original novel which came out after the first film, *Splinter in the Mind's Eye*, and is light-years better than the trilogies featuring Han Solo and Lando Calrissian in solo adventures.

—reviewed by Tyson Blue

CHAPMAN'S PICKS

STEEL BEACH by John Varley (Ace/Putnam, Jul 92, \$22.95, hb)

THE AVENGER by Louise Cooper (Bantam/Spectra, Feb 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE DIFFERENCE ENGINE by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling (Bantam/Spectra, Feb 92, \$5.99, pb)

MUTANT STAR by Karen Haber (Bantam/Spectra, Feb 92, \$4.50, pb)

EIGHT SKILLED GENTLEMEN by Barry Hughart (Bantam/Spectra, Feb 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE EXILE KISS by George Alec Effinger (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

SHELTERED LIVES by Charles Oberndorf (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE REMARKABLES by Robert Reed (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

pb)
THE DEATH GATE CYCLE : VOL 3—FIRE SEA by Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman (Bantam/Spectra, Mar 92, \$5.99, pb)

USE OF WEAPONS by Iain M. Banks (Bantam/Spectra, Apr 92, \$4.99, pb)

CAPTAIN JACK ZODIAC by Michael Kandel (Bantam/Spectra, Apr 92, \$4.99, pb)

WILD CARDS X: DOUBLE SOLITAIRE edited by George R. R. Martin (Bantam/Spectra, Apr 92, \$5.50, pb)

BEAUTY by Sheri S. Tepper (Bantam/Spectra, Apr 92, \$5.99, pb)

IN THE WRONG HANDS by Edward Gibson (Bantam/Spectra, May 92, \$5.99, pb)

PRAYERS TO BROKEN STONES by Dan Simmons (Bantam/Spectra, May 92, \$5.99, pb)

THE MODULAR MAN by Roger McBride Allen (Bantam/Spectra, Jun 92, \$4.99, pb)

FULL SPECTRUM 3 edited by Lou Aronica, Amy Stout and Betsy Mitchell (Bantam/Spectra, Jun 92, \$5.99, pb)

THE END-OF-EVERYTHING MAN by Tom DeHaven (Bantam/Spectra, Jun 92, \$4.99, pb)

STAR WARS VOL. 1—HEIR TO THE EMPIRE by Timothy Zahn (Bantam/Spectra, Jun 92, \$5.99, pb)

THE GAP INTO CONFLICT: THE REAL STORY by Stephen R. Donaldson (Bantam/Spectra, Jul 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE FUTUR ADVENTURES OF BATMAN: VOL. 2 FEATURING THE PENGUIN edited by Martin H. Greenberg (Bantam/Spectra, Jul 92, \$4.99, pb)

A TIME OF EXILE by Katharine Kerr (Bantam/Spectra, Jul 92, \$5.50, pb)

HORSES OF HEAVEN by Gillian Bradshaw (Bantam/Spectra, Aug 92, \$5.99, pb)

FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE: THE GAP INTO VISION by Stephen R. Donaldson (Bantam/Spectra, Aug 92, \$5.99, pb)

BUG JACK BARRON by Norman Spinrad (Bantam/Spectra, Aug 92, \$5.99, pb)

THE SILENT CITY by Elisabeth Vonarburg (Bantam/Spectra, Aug 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE EMANCIPATOR BOOK III: THE ORPHEUS MACHINE by Ray Aldridge (Bantam/Spectra, Sep 92, \$4.99, pb)

FESTIVAL TIDE by Elizabeth Hand (Bantam/Spectra, Sep 92, \$5.50, pb)

RESSURECTION by Katharine Kerr (Bantam/Spectra, Sep 92, \$3.50, pb)

METAPHASE by Vonda McIntyre (Bantam/Spectra, Sep 92, \$4.99, pb)

DARK AT HEART edited by Karen & Joe R. Lansdale (Dark Harvest, \$21.95, hb)

BAD BRAINS by Kathe Koja (Dell/Abys, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

SUCCUBI by Edward Lee (Diamond, Mar 92, \$4.50, pb)

MISTRESS OF THE EMPIRE by Raymond E. Feist & Janny Wurts (Doubleday/Foundation, \$20.00, hc)

STARS MY DESTINATION by Alfred Bester (Epic Graphic, Jun 92, \$21.95, oversize)

BORDERLAND by S. K. Epperson (Donald I. Fine, \$19.95, hb)

REPRISAL by F. Paul Wilson (Jove, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

SAURIAN by William Schoell (Leisure, Mar 92, \$4.50, pb)

CHILLED TO THE BONE edited by Robert T. Garcia (Mayfair Games, 1992, \$20.00, hc)

SOULS by Katina Alexis (Pocket, Feb 92, \$4.99, pb)

NIGHT SOUNDS by Warner Lee (Pocket, Mar 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE DEVIL'S END by D. A. Fowler (Pocket, Apr 92, \$4.99, pb)

VENOM VIRUS by Richard Parry (Pocket, Apr 92, \$4.99, pb)

THE UPRISING by Brent Monahan (Pocket, Jun 92, \$4.99, pb)

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP by J. M. Morgan (Pocket, Jul 92, \$4.99, pb)

BOY'S LIFE by Robert R. McCammon (Pocket Star, May 92, \$5.99, pb)

WILDERNESS by Dennis Danvers (Pocket Star, Jun 92, \$4.99, pb)

TRICKSTER by Chris Curry & Lisa Dean (Pocket Star, Aug 92, \$4.99, pb)

DYING BREATH by Jon A. Harrrald (Pocket Star, Aug 92, \$5.50, pb)

MISSING PIECES: How to Investigate Ghosts, UFOs, Psychics, and Other Mysteries by Joe Nickell & Robert Baker (Prometheus Books, May 92, \$23.95, hc)

MYTHOLOGY'S LAST GODS by William R. Harwood (Prometheus Books, Jun 92, \$24.95, hc)

SECRETS OF THE SUPERNATURAL by Joe Nickell & John F. Fischer (Prometheus Books, Jun 92, \$24.95 hc/\$16.95 pb)

BRING ME CHILDREN by David Martin (Random House, Jul 92, \$16.00 hc)

JOHN MCCARTY'S OFFICIAL SPLATTER MOVIE GUIDE VOL. II by John McCarty (St. Martin's, Feb 92, \$12.95, tp)

WOLFFLOW by K. W. Jeter (St. Martin's, Apr 92, \$18.95)

SPACE... THE FINAL FRONTIER by

Subscribe today!

Only \$19.00 for 4 issues in the US
(\$21.00 Canada/ \$23.00 all other)

send your sub to:

2AM MAGAZINE

Box 6754

Rockford, IL 61125-1754

Mike Benton (Taylor, Jun 92, \$24.95, oversize)

THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY—SCIENCE FICTION COMICS VOL #3 by Mike Benton (Taylor Jun 92, \$24.95, oversize)

AN IMPOSSIBLE SUMMER by B. W. Clough (Walker Publishing [young adult], \$14.95, hc)

DEL-DEL by Victor Kelleher (Walker Publishing [young adult], Jun 92, \$16.95, hc)

DREAM MAKER by W. A. Harbinger (Walker, Sep 92, \$21.95, hb)

COFFIN ON THE WATER by Gwendoline Butler (Worldwide, Feb 92, \$3.99, pb)

HE HUFFED AND HE PUFFED by Barbara Paul (Worldwide Feb 92, \$3.99, pb)

SAVINGS AND LOAM by Ralph McInerney (Worldwide, Mar 92, \$3.99, pb)

UNDER THE INFLUENCE by Elizabeth Travis (Worldwide, Mar 92, \$3.99, pb)

THIS BLESSED PLCT by M.R.D. Meek (Worldwide, Apr 92, \$3.99, pb)

MURDER IN HIGH PLACES by Hugh Pentecost (Worldwide, Apr 92, \$3.99, pb)

HOUSTON IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR by Susan Rogers Cooper (Worldwide, May 92, \$3.99, pb)

MURDER WITHOUT RESERVATION by Bernie Lee (Worldwide, May 92, \$3.99, pb)

HARD TACK by Barbara D'Amato (Worldwide, Jun 92, \$3.99, pb)

MOM DOTH MURDER SLEEP by James Yaffe (Worldwide, Jun 92, \$3.99, pb)

COFFIN IN FASHION by Gwendoline Butler (Worldwide, Jul 92, \$3.99, pb)

POISON PEN by Mary Kittredge (Worldwide, Jul 92, \$3.99, pb)

BURIED SCREAM by C. Dean Andersson (Zebra, Apr 92, \$4.50, pb)

SPECIALTY PRESS

ABERATIONS

Issue #13. Features: Holly Day, Gerard Daniel Houarner, Jackie Marunczyk, Sean Ponce and others. Single issue \$3.50 plus 4 first class stamps, 1 year/12 issues \$31.00, Canada \$37.00, overseas \$43.00. Order from Aberrations, Box 8040, Walnut Creek, CA 94596.

AFTER HOURS

Issue #14—Features: Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Robin Hoosier, Kathleen Jur-

gens, Gregory L. Norris, Tom Traub and others.

Issue #15—Features: Ty Drago, Boomer Murphy, Dean Alan Wehrli, Suzi K. West and more. Single issues \$4.00, 4 issue/1 year subscription \$14.00. Order from William G. Raley, After Hours, Box 538, Sunset Beach, CA 90742-0538.

ANAMNESIS BOOKS

WHAT ROUGH BOOK: DARK POEMS AND LIGHT by Keith Allen Daniels. Softcover, limited to 1000 copy press run: \$12.95 ppd. Order from Anamnesis Books, Box 1351, Clute, TX 77531-1351.

ASTROMANCER QUARTERLY

May 1992—Featuring: John Grey, Jay Kay Klein, A. R. Morlan, Joy Moreau, Leah Zeldes Smith and many others. Editor Joe Maragliano. Published by the Niagara Falls Science Fiction Association. Single copies \$2.25, 4 issue subscriptions \$8.00. Order from Astromancer Quarterly, c/o NFSFA, Box 500-0 Bridge Station, Niagara Falls, NY 14305.

CEMETERY DANCE

Winter 1992—Features: James S. Dorr, Brian Hodge, Norman Partridge, Jeffrey Osier and others. Single copies \$4.00, 4 issue subscription/1 year \$15.00. Order from Cemetery Dance, Box 858, Edgewood, MD 21040.

DEATHREALM

Issue #16—Spring 1992. Features: Brad Cahoon, Jeffrey Goddin, D. F. Lewis, William Trotter and others. Single copies \$4.00 (\$5.00 Canada; \$5.50 Overseas); 4 issue (one year) subscription \$15.00 (\$18.00 Canada; \$20.00 Overseas). Order from Mark Rainey, DEATHREALM, 3223F Regents Park, Greensboro, NC 27405.

CHRIS DRUMM BOOKS

The Unpublished Gunn (part one) by James Gunn \$4.00; Grasshoppers & Wild Honey (1928-1942) by R. A. Lafferty \$4.50; Sorceries and Sorrows (early poems) by Jessica Amanda Salmonson \$3.75; Blood Routines by Joel Ward \$3.50. Order from Chris Drumm Books, Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226

ELDRITCH TALES

Issue #26—Features: Annette S. Crouch, Thomas M. Egan, Ronald Kelly, Bentley Little, Andrew Marino, Clay Menzik, Roman A. Ranieri, Ken Wisman and others. Single copies \$6.00 plus \$1

p&h. Subscriptions \$24.00/4 issues. Order from Crispin Burnham, ELDRITCH TALES, 1051 Wellington Rd. Lawrence, KS 66049.

GRUE

Issue #14—Summer 1992. Features: Peter W. Hill, Robert Frazier, John Maclay, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Wayne Allen Sallee, Melanie Tem, Joan Vander Patten, Thomas Wilcox, and others. Single copies \$4.50 ppd; subscriptions/3 issues \$13.00; Canada \$16.00; overseas \$20.00. Order from Grue, Hell's Kitchen Productions, Box 370, Times Square Station, New York, NY 10108-0370.

HAUNTS

Issue #23—Featuring: D.R. Campbell, Jeffrey Landis, Lisa Lepovetsky-Jacie Ragan, Thomas M. Stratman, Jeff Vandermeer and more. Single issue \$3.95 plus \$1.00 p&h, 2 issues/\$7, subscriptions (4 issues) \$13.00. Order from Haunts, Nightshade Publications, Box 3342, Providence, RI 02906.

HORROR'S HEAD PRESS

Noctulpa #6: Souls In Pawn. Features Don D'Amassa, Anke Kriske, D. R. McBride, Jeffrey Osier and others. Single copies \$7.95 plus \$1.05 p&h (\$9.00 total), payable to George Hatch. Order from George Hatch, Box 5175, Long Island City, NY 11105.

JUST A MOMENT

Vol. #3, #3—Featuring: Keith Combs, Logan McNeil, Mary Ann Mitchell, Cindy Snyder and others. Edited by Mike Vandeloche. Single issue \$5, Subscription \$18.00 (\$22.00 Canada) Order from Pine Grove Press, Box 40, Jamesville, NY 13078.

MACLAY & ASSOCIATES

ABSOLUTE POWER by Ray Russell: \$49.00 hardcover.

MINDWARPS by John MacLay \$9.95 ppd hardcover. Order from MacLay & Associates, Box 16253, Baltimore, MD 21210.

MASTICATION PUBLICATIONS

Psychos: An Anthology of Psychological Horror edited by Michael A. Arnen—Features: Steve Eng, Robert Frazier Andrew Joron, Lisa Lepovetsky, Bucky Montgomery, Marthany Pelegrinas, Jacie Ragan, Wayne Allen Sallee and others. Single copies \$6.00 ppd. Order from Michael A. Arnen, Mastication Publications, 1700 Constitution

#D24, Pueblo, CO 81001.

MIDNIGHT ZOO

Issue #7. Features: Kevin J. Anderson, C. Darren Butler, Mike Hurley, Sonia Orin Lyris, Joy Ostreicher, Mary Shifman, Ken Wisman and others. Single issue \$6.00, 1 year \$29.95. Order from Midnight Zoo, Box 8040, Walnut Creek, CA 94596.

NECROFILE

Issue #3—Winter 1992. Features Rob Latham, Susan Michaud, Michael A. Morrison & Stefan Dziemianowicz, Brian Stableford, Douglas E. Winter and other reviewers. Single issue \$2.50; Subscriptions 1 year/4 issues \$10.00 first class mail, Canada \$12.00, overseas \$15.00. Order from Necronomicon Press, 101 Lockwood St., West Warwick, RI 02893.

NEW YORK REVIEW OF SCIENCE FICTION

Issue #43—March 1992. Published monthly. Kathryn Cramer, editor. Reviews, includes reading lists by Charles deLint, Phyllis Gotlieb, and Elizabeth Vonarburg; feature articles by Frank Dietz, David Ketterer and Joan D. Vinge. Single copies \$2.50, Subscriptions 1 year/12 issues \$25.00, Canada \$29.00, overseas \$37.00 (sent air printed mater. Order from Dragon Press, Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.

QUANTUM

Winter/Spring 1992—Features: Michael Bishop, David Langford, Geoff Rymen, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Darrell Schweitzer and others. Single copies \$3.00; one-year subscription (3 issues) \$7.00 (\$10.00 outside US). Order from Thrust Publications, 8217 Langport Terrace, Gaithersburg, MD 20877.

SPACE & TIME

Issue #80—Featuring: Lee Ballentine, Gerard Houarner, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, D. M. Vosk, Basil Wells and others. Single issue \$5.00, one-year subscription (2 issue) \$9.50/foreign \$10.00 surface rate. Order from Space & Time, 138 W. 70th St. #4B, New York, NY 10023-4432.

SPINE-TINGLING PRESS

HUNTER'S MOON by Kevin J. Anderson (2 tapes, \$14.95)

MONSTERS: THREE TALES by Joseph A. Citro (1 tape, \$9.95)

CAUGHT IN TIME by Matthew J. Costello (1 tape, \$9.95)

DARK DIXIE by Ronald Kelly (1 tape, \$9.95)

STAINED BLACK by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (2 tapes, \$14.95)

THESE DREAMS THAT SLEEP

DISURBS by David B. Silva (2 tapes, \$14.95)

Postage \$2.50 per order. Order from

Spine-Tingling Press Box 186, Agoura Hills, CA 91376.

TAL PUBLICATIONS

Snakes by S. Darnbrook Colson. 46 pages. Order from Tal Publications, Box 1837, Leesburg, VA 22075.

THE TOME

Manley Wade Wellman Special Issue. Also Features: Hugh B. Cave, Doni Lazenby, Lisa Lepovetsky, Tom Piccirilli and more. Single issue \$3.95, 1 year/4 issues \$12.00.

WE ARE THE WEIRD

Publisher: Joe Bob Briggs. Single Copies \$3.00, published bi-weekly. 1 year subscription \$35.00 (\$70.00 foreign). Order from We Are The Weird, Box 2002, Dallas, TX 75221.

WEIRDBOOK

Issue #27—Features Joseph Payne Brennan, John Brizzolara, Scott Edelman, Brian Lumley, Darrell Schweitzer & Jason Van Holander and others. Single copies \$6.00 plus 1.15 p&h in U.S. (\$1.30 p&h Canada, \$1.56 p&h elsewhere) Subscriptions: 7 issues/\$25.00 (\$30.00 outside U.S.). Order from W. Paul Ganley, Box 149, Buffalo, NY 14226-0149.

COMICS

Epic: An Anthology (4 issue series) Clive Barker's Hellraiser & Night Breed, The Sleaze Brothers, Stalkers, Wild Cards and other graphic stories. (Epic Comics \$4.95 each)

READERS POLL

We received votes on all the stories that appeared in issue #19. Because 2AM publishes a variety of stories to appeal to all our readers, our poll reflects only reader responses and does not necessarily reflect on the quality of the stories. Votes were tallied from actual ballots sent in to the Readers Poll.

1st place: "The Blind Poet" by Dean Wesley Smith

2nd place: "Undying Galmor" by Lois Tilton & "Thinning The Herd" by Ronald Kelly

3rd place: "Payment" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Future issues will include Blythe Ayne, Anne Bishop, David Clayton Carrad, Michael R. Collings, Lee Dresselhaus, Robert Ford, Anne Goring, David Michael Hansen, Henry L. Lefevre, Scott Mackay, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, William Schoell, Darrell Schweitzer, Diane Sloan, Tim Waggoner and others. Don't miss it!